

Earth Log: Long, difficult summer at Millerton Lake

By Mark Grossi



Irrigation water runs along the dried-up ditch in the Central Valley.

JAE C. HONG — AP

The drought summer of 2014 is in the rear view mirror at Millerton Lake, but it will long be remembered -- east San Joaquin Valley farmers were left without water from this lake for the first time in many decades.

As part of an agreement dating back to the 1930s, the lake's water has been released all summer long to a group of west Valley farmers who have rights to the water dating back to the 1800s.

Never heard of this arrangement? Or, maybe you have, and you don't remember the details. This is the short explanation.

The west-siders exchanged their river rights so east Valley farmers from Chowchilla to Bakersfield could get San Joaquin water from Millerton Lake. Instead, they get Northern California river water -- unless there is a monster drought, like this one.

Hotly debated protections for the environment also kept a lot of water in Northern California, so it was not just a matter of an epic drought hitting the state.

This year for the first time since the contracts were signed decades ago, the Northern California connection dried up, and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation was forced to tap Millerton for the west-siders.

About 200,000 acre-feet of water -- 65 billion gallons or so -- were released from Friant Dam and flowed to the Mendota Pool for growers in the San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors, who farm about 240,000 acres from Mendota north to Patterson.

The east-siders, who have 1 million acres, have been relying on wells and buying any water they can find. They're not alone. There are many west-side areas, such as Westlands Water District, that do not have historic river rights. They were in the same position as east-siders.

What will the financial hit look like?

Economists from the University of California at Davis estimated the statewide \$44 billion-a-year agriculture industry would suffer a total loss of about \$2.2 billion in revenue and higher water costs.

No one has come up with an updated estimate. But it looks like most of that hit will take place in the San Joaquin Valley.

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