

Valley farmers welcome approaching rainstorm

By Robert
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A cow grazes on dry grassland at Fresno State's pastureland at the San Joaquin Experimental Range near Coarsegold in 2012. The three-year drought has left rangeland depleted of grass. Ranchers and farmers are welcoming a major storm that is expected to hit the region Thursday night.

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A looming storm that is expected to bring high winds and heavy rain to the San Joaquin Valley has farmers more excited than fearful.

"This is absolutely a godsend," said Fresno County cattle rancher Mike Hacker. "We have been in a situation where we have had very little, if any, grass in the hills."

Hacker said the state's ongoing drought — one of the worst in its history — has left the area's rangeland with little to no grasses for cattle to feed on. Ranchers have had to supplement their cattle's feed by buying hay, often at very high prices. A good soaking will help grasses sprout and grow.

National Weather Service meteorologist Cindy Bean said farmers should get what they have been waiting for. She expects the storm to drop at least 3/4 of an inch to an inch in the Fresno area. Rain should begin falling by late afternoon Thursday and continue into Friday.

But along with the much needed moisture will come strong winds. Bean said a high wind warning is in effect Thursday from 10 a.m. until 10 p.m. with wind speeds at between 15 mph to 25 mph. Gusts could reach between 35 mph to 50 mph.

Wind gusts could be the strongest on the west side, especially along the Interstate 5 corridor. West side farmer Joe Del Bosque said strong winds, coupled with heavy rain, could cause some growers to lose almond trees, but he hopes any damage is minimal.

“All in all, rain right now is good news,” he said.

Del Bosque, a diversified grower who farms melons, asparagus and almonds, said the timing of this new storm couldn't be better. He recently planted 200 acres of wheat that he intends to irrigate using only rain water. It's called dryland farming and Del Bosque knows it is a gamble in California, but it's one he is willing to take.

“That land has been sitting idle for several years,” he said. “But with the rain we got recently and what we are getting soon, we will at least be able to get something growing.”

Del Bosque said that at a minimum he should be able to produce enough of a crop to sell as cattle feed and with more rain he may be able to harvest the wheat for grain.

Ryan Jacobsen, [Fresno County Farm Bureau](#) executive director, said the rain may slow harvesting of some crops, including citrus, but it is being welcomed.

“I don't think there is a single farmer complaining,” he said. “But what would also be nice are some colder temperatures.”

Tree fruit and grape growers need rain, but also freezing temperatures to put their trees and vines into much-needed dormancy. Not enough chilling temperatures can cause poor leafing, flowering and fruit development.

Farmers aren't likely to get those cold temperatures anytime soon. The forecast for the next several days calls for overnight temperatures to be in the low-to-mid-40s and daytime temperatures in the mid-to-upper 60s Thursday and 58 degrees on Friday.

“We should be in the mid-50s this time of year,” Bean said. “And even with this storm we will still be slightly above normal.”

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