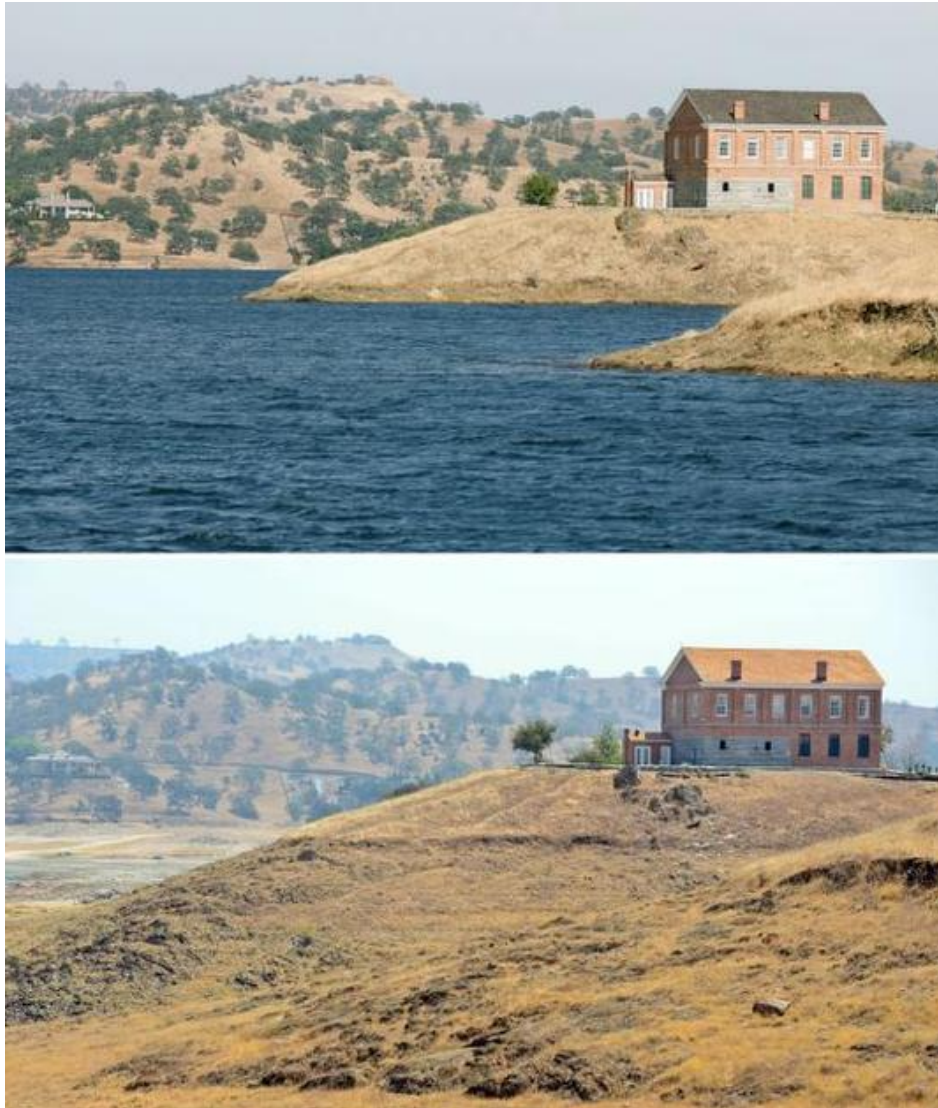


Dry January starts familiar feeling of dread among farm water leaders

By Mark Grossi



What a difference in a dry year. The top photo of Millerton Courthouse at Millerton Lake, northeast of Fresno, was taken in 2009. Bottom photo was shot in August 2014 during one of the driest seasons on record.

DARRELL WONG (TOP), CRAIG KOHLRUSS (BOTTOM) — The Fresno Bee [Buy Photo](#)

Facing a fourth drought year and maybe the driest January on record, farm water leaders hope storms are on the way, but they saw a dry January last year and got no water from the federal Central Valley Project.

“Last year was critically dry,” said Ron Jacobsma, general manager of the Friant Water Authority, representing 15,000 east San Joaquin Valley growers. “If things don’t change, this year could be a catastrophe.”

This week, Valley water leaders have been in Reno for the annual water users meeting, hoping to get a better perspective from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation about a dismal winter so far. The bureau owns the Central Valley Project that delivers water to millions of acres here.

Bureau Mid-Pacific Director David Murillo said his agency will be cautious in trying to develop supplies to help water users.

“While we were encouraged by storms in December, this very dry January illustrates just how precarious our water supplies can become,” Murillo said.

In late February, the bureau makes a forecast of summer water delivery. The estimates can change, depending on the weather.

Last week, the State Water Project estimated its customers could expect 15% of the water they would like to buy. On Friday, the State Water Resources Control Board, the arbiter of water rights in California, told 9,000 water rights holders that cutbacks could happen if significant storms do not appear over the next few months.

On the federal project, which serves a swath of the central San Joaquin Valley, no one has high expectations, either.

“It was looking like a good start back in December,” said Dan Nelson, executive director of the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority, representing west-side contractors such as Westlands Water District. “Now we’re just hoping the storms start up again.”

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The snowpack is less than a third of average — double the size of the tiny snowpack a year ago, but still quite low. Ron Milligan, operations manager for the bureau, said the lack of snowpack concerns him the most in the statewide picture.

He said, “Virtually all of that water content we had a month ago in snowpack is gone.”

Federal officials said reservoirs are less than half full. The combined storage for the largest reservoirs is slightly less than it was last January. The drought is beginning to show strain on the reservoir system, Milligan said.

“We’ve had a bad run (of water years),” he said.

Farm water leaders say both east and west sides of the Valley are again at risk of getting no river water from the federal Central Valley Project.

The west-siders buy Northern California river water pumped to the Valley through the project’s vast canal system. The east-siders buy San Joaquin River water captured at Millerton Lake, northeast of Fresno.

“We need two or three significant storms in Northern California and maybe one or two down here soon,” said Jacobsma of Friant. “Or we could wind up in a very similar situation as last year.”

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