

Earth Log: Farm water agency reacts to drought with changes at top

By Mark Grossi



Citrus growers Geoff Galloway and Brent Doyel walk between two Terra Bella orchards of mandarins in the Friant service area. One got water last year, the other did not.

MARK GROSSI — The Fresno Bee

In drought-scarred farm country, there has been a shakeup at the Friant Water Authority, which represents 15,000 east San Joaquin Valley growers who got no river water last year.

The authority board of directors Monday announced the general manager's duties would be split into two roles, one being the new position of chief executive officer. The new executive would be the face of Friant, pursuing broad strategic and policy issues with legislators and water regulators.

The other position would remain under the name of general manager and focus on key initiatives within the agency. The authority serves an area covering more than 1 million acres from Chowchilla to Kern County.

"If we had not wound up with zero allocation last year, this probably would not be happening," said board chairman Harvey Bailey.

Last year for the first time in its existence, the Friant Division of the federal Central Valley Project got no San Joaquin River water for farm fields. The river water at Millerton Lake was instead sent to west Valley growers with San

Joaquin water rights dating back to the 1800s.

Friant did not dispute the west-side growers' right to the river water, but east-side officials felt the State Water Resources Control Board could have better divided the available water statewide to allow more supplies to the west-siders.

More water for the west-siders would have meant some Millerton Lake water could have gone to east-siders. Friant sued the state board in late October, hoping to prevent the same thing from happening this year. The case continues.

At the time the lawsuit was filed, Friant officials said their city customers, such as Orange Cove, were forced to buy water at much higher prices. In addition, groundwater was badly depleted in the region, leaving many rural residents with dry wells.

As a fourth year of drought appears, Friant officials say they will move quickly over the next several months to hire a chief executive, who will report to the board.

Ron Jacobsma is the authority's general manager, a position that will report to the chief executive.

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