

An encore of Valley drought crisis — only worse

By Mark Grossi

The Madera Canal at Millerton Lake remains dry, like many irrigation canals in Central California.

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- By the numbers
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 - 3 million: Valley acres irrigated with river water from the federal Central Valley Project.
 - 15,000: Number of east Valley farms that might not get water again this year.
 - 86%: The unfilled portion of Pine Flat Reservoir on the Kings River.

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The next train wreck in California's drought is headed for the San Joaquin Valley this week when federal leaders forecast how much river water farmers can expect to irrigate nearly 3 million acres this summer.

Most folks in farm country are expecting the same number as last year — zero for both east and west sides of the Valley. Consecutive years of no river water would be another unprecedented body punch from a drought dating back to the winter of 2011-12.

"We are planning for the worst," said west Valley farmer Ted Sheely, who used his wells to get by last year. "But we're hoping for the best. Which is anything above zero. It's crazy."

After one of the driest Januaries on record, a fourth drought year seems inevitable, say many water leaders. In response, manic planning and big spending are spreading quickly in the Valley's \$37 billion farm belt. One farmer drills a \$1 million well, another pays \$1,400 an acre-foot for scarce extra water — five times the cost in an average year.

More rain has fallen this year than last, so why is the winter turning into another dud? Storms have been warm and mostly focused in Northern California. [The Sierra snowpack](#) is actually slightly smaller overall than it was last year.

East of Fresno, reservoirs such as Pine Flat are lower than last year while large northern reservoirs such as [Shasta](#) have more water. Pumping water from north to south, however, is complicated by restrictions for water quality and endangered species in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

The pumping issue has lit up politically. Last week, the State Water Resources Control Board rejected a joint state and federal request to allow more Northern California river water to be sent south.

House majority leader [Kevin McCarthy](#), R-Bakersfield, called the rejection “a stunning rebuke of common sense” because state and federal wildlife and water agencies supported the request. He and other Valley elected leaders are demanding a reversal.

This week, the angst will come from the initial forecast of federal water deliveries for summer. No date has been set, but the forecast in years past has usually been made in this week in February.

The forecast is important because it involves a huge swath of California’s interior served by the [Central Valley Project](#) (CVP), the largest water system in the nation. The CVP is operated by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

The bureau delivers Northern California water pumped through the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to the Valley’s west side. It also captures San Joaquin River water in Millerton Lake and sends it to the Valley’s east side.

On the east side, farmer Harvey Bailey figures he will need to use his 65 wells to irrigate 1,100 acres of citrus and olive trees in the Orange Cove area. He said he will do whatever he can to get through the summer if the dry weather continues this winter.

“We’ve pushed out the least-productive groves, so we’re saving that way,” he said. “We contracted to drill three new wells. Two of them were dry, but one gave us a decent amount of water.”

On the west side, Sheely will fallow about 30% of his 10,000-acre operation. He will use his wells to keep his pistachio trees alive.

“This year will be a real hardship on many people,” said Sheely, who buys water from [Westlands Water District](#), a 600,000-acre district based mostly in west Fresno County. “Two years in a row like this is too much.”

Farmers in Westlands left 220,000 acres barren last year. The prospect of more fallowed acreage faces the whole west side again, water leaders said.

San Luis Reservoir in western Merced County holds more water than it did last year. But it’s mostly for the State Water Project, which shares San Luis storage with the federal project, said Ara Azhderian, water policy manager with the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority, representing west-side federal CVP contractors, such as Westlands.

“For the CVP, there is no appreciable 2015 water in storage, which is ominous for everyone in the San Joaquin Valley,” he said.

The east side of the Valley gets pulled into the equation when there’s not enough CVP water to supply a group of west-side farmers who hold rights dating back to the 1800s for San Joaquin River water. [These growers](#) — farming 240,000 acres from Patterson to Mendota and east of Interstate 5 — took Sacramento River water so east-side growers, like Bailey, could get San Joaquin water.

For the first time since this exchange of river water began decades ago, the west-siders couldn’t get Sacramento River water last year. So federal officials were forced to release San Joaquin River water from Millerton Lake to the west side. East-siders didn’t get river water in 2014.

With Shasta Reservoir about half full now, water leaders hope late winter storms will add several hundred thousand acre-feet to at least provide some supply for the west-siders. That would mean some San Joaquin River water would be made available to east-siders.

But there may not be a lot of water available from the San Joaquin this year. The snowpack, which melts and provides water in spring and summer, is far below average, according to snow surveys at the end of January.

The water content in the snow at [Huntington Lake](#), elevation 7,000 feet east of Fresno, is only 2.5 inches, which is 26% of average for Feb. 1. More importantly, it is only 13% of the April 1 average.

In other words, storms would need to add more than 15 inches of water content in the next six weeks, just to make this an average year at Huntington. Snow measurements over other areas in the mountains above Millerton Lake show the entire basin is about 13% of the April 1 average.

“This year is a little better than last year,” said Randy McFarland, local historian and spokesman for Friant Water Users and Kings River Conservation District. “But we’re still way down in terms of snowpack. It’s very concerning.”

East-side farmers are dreading a zero allocation, but rural residents are affected also. Last year, when farmers leaned heavily on groundwater pumping, the groundwater table dropped and thousands of rural residents wound up with dry wells.

[Friant Water Users](#) represents 15,000 east-side growers. It also has rural communities among its customers, including Orange Cove, Lindsay, Strathmore and Terra Bella. If the Bureau of Reclamation announces a zero allocation this week, will officials also say anything about finding water for rural residents?

Friant general manager Ron Jacobsma said he’s not sure.

“I suspect it will be zero allocation for Friant, but maybe there will be some mention of plans for health and safety water supplies for Friant communities and rural residential users,” he said. “It’s unclear what they will say right now.”

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