

Second drought nightmare will become official after federal water forecast

By
MarkGrossi



The storm on Monday left standing water along Elm Avenue in Easton. California needs more storms to drop snow in the Sierra.

JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE [Buy Photo](#)

We're late in another desperately dry winter, waiting for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's February forecast of irrigation deliveries for this summer in the San Joaquin Valley.

Federal officials were expected to say something last week, but they're taking a few extra days to consider. You can understand why.

Last year, more than 2 million acres in the Valley went without deliveries of federal river water. This year might be just as bad, and nobody is in a hurry to say this is a replay of last year's nightmare.

Hundreds of thousands of acres were fallowed, wells went dry for rural residents and losses are expected to be billions of dollars.

I expect reality to spank everyone late this week when the bureau makes some announcement about water supply for east- and west-side growers who buy water from the federal Central Valley Project. Farm water officials say they still cling to hope for at least some water, but they're expecting to hear a zero allocation again.

Despite a storm Sunday and Monday, the [snowpack](#) has dropped to below 20% of the April 1 average. Last year's puny snowpack was actually larger at this point in the year.

California has only five weeks left of the wet season and needs more than the modest storm that just passed through. That was like shooting spit wads at an elephant.

There is one group of Valley growers who got federal river water last year, mainly because they have rights dating back to the 1800s. They also have contracts assuring them of water even in many kinds of dry years.

The group is in the [San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors Water Authority](#), based in Los Banos. The area covers 240,000 acres from Patterson to Mendota.

Decades ago, they traded their San Joaquin water for Northern California water so east-side growers could use the San Joaquin River — hence the name “exchange contractors.”

Last week, the [U.S. Bureau of Reclamation](#), which runs the Central Valley Project, told the exchange contractors that it is committed to delivering a 75% allotment of water under terms of the contract, which is a higher priority than most customers on the CVP.

The bureau was forced to tap Millerton Lake last year for exchange contractor water. That left no water for the east-side growers — the first time that has ever happened to growers in the Friant Water Authority.

A key to avoid tapping Millerton is the projected inflow of river water to the largest CVP reservoir, Shasta in Northern California. This year, Shasta would need to have 4 million acre-feet of water, roughly eight times the capacity of Millerton Lake.

But the expected inflow for this year is now projected to be 3.3 million acre-feet, far short of the mark.

There is more to the story. The river water coming from Northern California must cross the sensitive Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, where endangered fish and water quality require additional flows of river water.

The [State Water Resources Control Board](#), the arbiter of California's water, has declined a request to temporarily increase water pumping from the delta, even though the idea was supported by the U.S. Department Fish and Wildlife and others.

Last week, speakers at a lengthy state board meeting urged officials to allow the pumping. There is no word yet about any possible change. Stay tuned.

Contact Mark Grossi: mgrossi@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6316 or [@markgrossi](#) on Twitter.