

Drought pressure creates cracks in powerful farm water authority

By Mark Grossi



The Madera Canal, located below Millerton Lake, has been mostly empty the last two years.

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Changing directions

- *Five irrigation districts have quit a powerful water agency over a drought-inspired change.*
- *Farm water leaders want a bigger voice in water allocations this year.*
- *New alliances may be developed in the Valley.*

In the San Joaquin Valley's frenzied attempts to cope with the drought crisis, five farm water districts have left the Friant Water Authority, the cornerstone of farm water delivery along 1 million acres.

The powerful authority lost a quarter of its membership in the last month over differences in how to battle for more water in an east-Valley farming belt worth several billion dollars annually.

"We don't know how this will shake out," said Tulare County farmer Mark Watte, who is chairman of the Friant board. "These are desperate times. We haven't faced a drought this bad in our 65 years."

It's not a fatal blow to the authority, but the organization is clearly showing cracks from the drought pressure. The authority, which works on legal and political issues as well as operating the massive Friant-Kern Canal, will continue with 16 members now.

The five departing agencies are Madera Irrigation District, Fresno Irrigation District, Delano-Earlimart Irrigation District, Lower Tule River Irrigation District and Pixley Irrigation District. The districts may form new regional alliances to help them cope with water issues as the drought crisis hits this summer.

Drought angst ripples through 15,000 east-side farms stretching from Chowchilla to the Tehachapis, featuring some of the country's finest citrus orchards. Communities and businesses in Madera, Fresno, Tulare and Kern counties rely on farms using San Joaquin River water from Millerton Lake.

Last year, east-side growers suffered their first-ever summer without river water from the Central Valley Project at Millerton Lake. Friant leaders said federal officials didn't operate precisely under contract conditions, adding that Friant should have gotten at least some water from Millerton. But many felt their voices were not heard.

Friant officials reviewed their management structure and decided to add a chief executive officer who would take the lead in political circles to state Friant's case. The search for a CEO continues.

But the five member districts that left Friant don't agree with the idea of adding the new manager and a hefty salary. It's a difference in philosophy, not a bitter dispute, according to Dan Vink, general manager of both Lower Tule River and Pixley irrigation districts.

"We would like to see the operation become more streamlined and focused," he said. "But there's no animosity about any of this. It's an amicable parting. We will continue working with Friant districts."

Said Gary Serrato, general manager at Fresno Irrigation District: "We just didn't agree with some of the things that have occurred."

At Madera Irrigation District, board president Carl Janzen said the drought was the main problem. He said the idea of adding a CEO and more cost made it difficult to remain in the authority.

"I think things would have to change considerably before the district would return to the authority," he said.

Not all federal contractors on the east side are part of Friant Water Authority. According to authority records, 21 of the 30 federal contractors were members until the five dropped out this year. Chowchilla Water District, for instance, is not a Friant member, but it does have a contract for water from Millerton Lake.

Contractors pay Friant Water Authority for the operation and maintenance of the Friant-Kern Canal, the 151.8-mile-long canal from Millerton to the Kern River in Bakersfield. But Friant members also pay dues to the authority to represent them.

It is possible that other regional alliances could now be developed among the contractors who are not part of the authority. Janzen said his board is exploring the idea of banding together with Chowchilla, Gravelly Ford and Fresno irrigation districts.

Dale Brogan, general manager of Delano-Earlimart Irrigation District, said he doesn't know what the future holds, but it's important for the contractors to speak with one voice on matters that affect everyone on the Valley's east side.

He said Delano-Earlimart has about 53,000 acres in southern Tulare and northern Kern counties, serving more than 400 growers. Half the acreage is grapes, he said. There are also pistachios, almonds and various fruit trees. In all, the district is about 90% permanent crops, which need water every year.

How is the district going to survive another year without river water?

“We have some investments in groundwater banking, and we can get a little water that way,” Brogan said. “But the rest will likely be private groundwater wells.”

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