

# California orders no water diversions despite legal rights

By FENIT NIRAPPIL

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — About 1,500 farms and individuals in the Central Valley were ordered Thursday to stop taking water from rivers and streams for irrigation, the latest move by state regulators to save water amid intensifying drought conditions.

It was the start of the latest round of water restrictions as rivers and streams across California run too dry to provide enough water to grow crops and to provide safe passage for fish.

The State Water Resources Control Board started sending letters to water rights holders, mostly Central Valley farmers in the San Joaquin River watershed, ordering them to stop pumping from streams. The order only applies to those who obtained water licenses after 1914.

California's water rights system gives priority to those with claims more than a century old in dry years. But even those so-called senior water rights holders in the San Joaquin River watershed will likely face cutbacks in California's fourth year of drought, the board's letter warned. Those are people and agencies that made their claims before 1914.

The board has not restricted senior water rights since it prohibited pumping on a portion of the Sacramento River in the 1970s.

Farmers are pumping water from underground wells and buying water from other sources as they face increasing restrictions on the use of government-monitored water during the drought. Federal and state agencies also slashed water deliveries from reservoir systems earlier in the year.

Farmers, cities and energy companies in California have about 36,000 claims to divert water for their needs, including for irrigation and for hydroelectric dams. The water board has the power to restrict those claims if there is not enough water to meet the demand.

More than 5,000 water rights were suspended last year, which the board says helped contribute to fallowed fields and job losses at farms.

People who ignore the board and illegally take water face fines of \$1,000 per day, or \$10,000 daily penalties for disobeying cease and desist orders.

Representatives of agricultural groups in the San Joaquin watershed couldn't immediately be reached for comment.

About 100 farms along the Scott River watershed in rural Northern California were also ordered to stop diverting water. The board is expected to continue restricting access to water in other parts of the state over the next month.