

Drought shakeup continues as Friant Water Authority general manager steps down

By Mark Grossi



Friant Dam rises above the town of Friant. The Friant Water Authority operates the dam, which captures the San Joaquin River.

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In the wake of zero water allocations again this year, Ronald D. Jacobsma has stepped down as general manager of the Friant Water Authority, representing 13 water districts on the San Joaquin Valley's east side.

Jacobsma's separation from the authority follows the departure of eight water districts over differences with the board of directors. Anxiety and disagreements over California's intense drought is at the bottom of the shakeup, but the Jacobsma departure is considered amicable.

"It has been a pleasure working with you all and serving you all these years," Jacobsma told the board on Thursday.

Eric Borba, who became chairman of the Friant board Thursday, said the board was pleased with Jacobsma's performance as general manager for the last 11 years.

"Ron has done a tremendous job," he said. "But we have had a lot of struggles over the zero allocations."

The board of directors late last year had decided to hire a chief executive officer in addition to having a general manager. Board members wanted more of a political presence as the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation makes allocation decisions.

The authority works on legal and political issues as well as operating the massive Friant-Kern Canal.

The authority had dropped from 21 to 16 members in the last month, as many districts decided they didn't like the idea of expanding the management. Three more member districts left in the last week — Shafter-Wasco Irrigation District, Exeter Irrigation District and Ivanhoe Irrigation District.

Eric Quinley, the authority's operations manager, is the interim general manager.

There are 17 districts on the east side that are not part of Friant Water Authority, according to authority records. Chowchilla Water District, for instance, has not been a Friant member for several years, but it has federal contract for water from Millerton Lake.

Contractors pay the 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 the 13 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 that are not part of the authority. The districts and authority officials have all expressed interest in working together on the issues common to all farm water agencies on the east side of the Valley.

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