

# Fresno Irrigation District farmers to get no water for first time in a century

By Tim Sheehan and Robert Rodriguez



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[Fresno Irrigation](#) general manager Gary Serrato said Thursday that the board decided to make only minimal water available for groundwater-recharge uses because its entitlement from the Kings River will be too small to provide water to farms in the 250,000-acre district.

Meanwhile, several other Valley water agencies and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation announced a deal Thursday that could provide up to 60,000 acre-feet of water to east-side growers.

A fourth consecutive dry year has plunged much of the state, including the San Joaquin Valley, into a drought, triggering tough decisions by water managers, local government and farmers. And while some districts are cutting back on deliveries, agreements are being made to provide water to other farmers.

Serrato said this is believed to be the first time in the district's 95 years of existence — and the first time in the Fresno

area's 145-year history of canal irrigation — that no regular water deliveries will be provided to farms. The district is receiving nothing from its entitlements to Class 2 water from the Central Valley Project's San Joaquin River or Friant Division.

"This is unprecedented," Serrato said. "This is the first time we have not been able to provide at least one irrigation run."

Fresno Irrigation District farmer Gene Branch said that while the news was not unexpected, it was still sobering.

"It is devastating," Branch said. "But what are you going to do, but turn on your pump and hopefully there will be a sufficient amount of groundwater to get us through."

Branch, the former general manager of Consolidated Irrigation District in Selma, said he understands the tough decisions districts make in times of drought.

"You can't release water you don't have," Branch said.

In non-drought years, the district delivers between 450,000 and 500,000 acre-feet of water for six months of the year. But the drought, now in its fourth year, has severely reduced the district's supplies. Last year, it could only deliver water for two months.

This year, the district will deliver about 90,000 acre-feet to recharge underground aquifers and to surface water treatment plants in Fresno and Clovis.

Water for recharge will go through the Fancher Creek, Dry Creek and Herndon Canal systems starting June 1, Serrato said.

"This means water will be flowing in canals, but except for approved hardship deliveries on the east side, will not be available for on-farm use," Serrato said.

The district's board approved a policy to levy \$2,500 fines for each illegal diversion of water from the system; anyone caught pulling water from canals illegally will lose their rights to canal water next year. District employees will be patrolling canals and pipelines this summer, and turnout gates will be chained and locked.

Serrato said predicted Kings River runoff during the prime snowmelt season from April through July is anticipated to be 7% to 10% of average, or less than 120,000 acre-feet. An acre-foot is about 325,900 gallons of water, or the volume it would take to cover one acre to a depth of one foot.

Serrato added that total runoff from the Kings River watershed by Sept. 30 is expected to be less than 16% of average this year, shattering the standing all-time low runoff of 23% set in 1924.

Elsewhere, an agreement was reached between east and westside water districts that will result in making about 60,000 acre-feet of water available to growers in the Friant Division along the east side of the Valley.

Involved in the negotiations were Friant Division contractors, the Exchange contractors, Westlands Water District, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and other agencies.

"The deal has a lot of pieces, but the gist of it is that Friant contractors are going to be securing some supplies either by purchase, exchange or time shifting exchanges in the San Luis Reservoir," said Eric Quinley, acting general manager of the Friant Water Authority.

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