

# California drought: State approves farmers' offer of 25% voluntary water cuts

By Fenit Nirappil The Associated Press

California regulators on Friday accepted a historic offer by farmers to make a 25 percent voluntary water cut to avoid deeper mandatory losses during the drought.

Officials with the state Water Resources Control Board made the announcement involving farmers in the delta of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers who hold some of California's strongest water rights.

The several hundred farmers made the offer after state officials warned they were days away from ordering some of the first cuts in more than 30 years to the senior water rights holders.

California water law is built around preserving the water claims of those rights holders. The threat of state cuts is a sign of the worsening impacts of the four-year drought.

The state already has mandated 25 percent conservation by cities and towns and curtailed water deliveries to many farmers and communities.

The most arid winter on record for the Sierra Nevada snowpack means there will be little runoff this summer to feed California's rivers, reservoirs and irrigation canals. As of Thursday, the U.S. Drought Monitor rated 94 percent of California in severe drought or worse.

About 350 farmers turned out Thursday at a farmers' grange near Stockton to talk over the delta farmers' bid to stave off deeper cuts.

"That doesn't necessarily mean they'll all participate" in the proposed voluntary cutbacks, said Michael George, the state's water master for the delta. But based on the farmers' comments, George said, he believed many will.

Longtime west side farmer Don Cameron said the water deal has the potential to benefit water users south of the delta.

"Maybe this allows for a redistribution of water through the delta," Cameron said. "And I think this will go a long way to show some good will."

Senior water-rights holders alone consume trillions of gallons of water a year. The state doesn't know exactly how much they use because of unreliable data collection.

Cameron said that even though many farmers in the San Joaquin Valley have received little to no surface water, the public perception is that farmers are not conserving water.

"We are all affected by the drought," Cameron said. "Hopefully, we will make it through this year, not just for farmers but for everyone in the rural communities who has their own wells."

Under the deal, delta farmers would have until June 1 to lay out how they will use 25 percent less water during what typically is a rain-free four months until September.

The delta is the heart of the water system in California, with miles of rivers interlacing fecund farmland. It supplies water to 25 million California residents and vast regions of farmland that produces nearly half of the fruits, nuts and vegetables grown in the U.S.

Agriculture experts, however, say they would expect only modest immediate effects on food prices from any reduction in water to the senior water-rights holders. Other states will be able to make up the difference if California moves away from low-profit crops, economists say.

State officials initially said they would also announce the first cuts of the four-year drought to senior rights holders on Friday. Water regulators said Thursday, however, that the announcement involving farmers and others in the watershed of the San Joaquin River would be delayed until at least next week.

It is unclear whether the delta farmers' offer would go far enough to save drying, warming waterways statewide.

Farmers use 80 percent of all water taken from the land in California. Senior water-rights holders alone consume trillions of gallons of water a year. The state doesn't know exactly how much they use because of unreliable data collection.

The 1977 cutback order for senior rights holders applied only to dozens of people along a stretch of the Sacramento River.

Although thousands of junior water rights holders have had their water curtailed this year, Gov. Jerry Brown has come under criticism for sparing farmers with senior water rights from mandatory cutbacks.

Increasing amounts of the state's irrigation water goes to specialty crops such as almonds, whose growers are expanding production despite the drought.