

Merced irrigation district releases reservoir water to farmers

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The Merced Irrigation District board of directors voted unanimously Monday to bring the Lake McClure reservoir down to 115,000 acre-feet and allocate about 10,000 acre-feet of water to farmers.

The board in March ruled it wouldn't allocate any surface water to farmers this year. At that time, Lake McClure's water level was at 8 percent. Since then, rainwater and snow melt have brought water levels back up, said Mike Jensen, MID's spokesman. As of Sunday, Lake McClure had 132,148 acre-feet of water, according to the MID's weekly update on its website.

The 10,000 acre-feet will give farmers about a half-inch of irrigation water for about two weeks starting Wednesday. The price tag to that distribution will be \$100 per acre-foot. Additional water will be released into the Merced River and sent downstream to fulfill MID water commitments, Jensen said.

"The idea of putting (the water) into the system is that a lot of wells are collapsing as people stop pumping for a week," said Dave Long, the board of directors president.

That helps those wells recharge, and it could save some crops.

Dave Long, MID board president

The district cannot divert water for irrigation after the reservoir falls below 11.5 percent, or 115,000 acre-feet. Irrigation water is measured in acre-feet, which is the amount of water that covers one acre of land at one foot deep.

Board director Jeff Marchini said he didn't want to risk losing the water. "I view it as we can leave it up there, and as far as I'm concerned, we're probably going to lose it," he said. "We're going to lose a lot more than if guys would make an attempt to shut their wells off and use the surface water when it's there."

Board director Scott Koehn addressed what he called "potential political ramifications" of releasing the water. He said the district formed alliances with agencies, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, that helped the district attain drought relief. "That's another unknown," Koehn said. "What do we risk with those relationships with a decision like this?"

The Merced National Wildlife Refuge can request water from MID when it allocates irrigation water, but that number is "miniscule" and won't affect the farmers' half-inch, Jensen said.

Farmers in the audience during Monday's meeting had mixed feelings about the water.

Doug Wells, an almond farmer out of Livingston, said he wasn't sure if the water would be of any help to farmers at this time in the season.

"Do I want another farmer to dry up and go bankrupt?" Wells asked the board. "Hell no. But the bottom line is it's going to happen, and you can't protect them with the (10,000) acre-feet of water.

"It's not going to make or break this season. This season has already been made and broke."

Farmer Mike Marchini said Le Grand is an area where the water would be most useful. Others agreed.

"If it can realistically benefit somebody, it's a good idea to put it out there," Marchini said.

The board did not make any decision regarding its own wells. Those details are to be determined, Jensen said.

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