

Disputed San Joaquin River water will go to west Valley farmers

By Mark Grossi
mgrossi@fresnobee.com

Federal officials Tuesday will begin releasing a disputed allotment of San Joaquin River water from Millerton Lake to a group of west San Joaquin Valley growers with water rights dating back to the 1870s.

East-Valley growers last week had argued the unexpected allotment belonged to them, citing an agreement this year with the west-side growers over water in Millerton.

But the west-siders, who belong to the [San Joaquin River Exchange Contractor Authority](#), said they have honored the earlier deal, and this water has nothing to do with that agreement. The additional water from spring storms should be distributed through the historic rights process.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation did not comment on the dispute last week. On Monday, it announced water releases to the west-siders would begin at 7 a.m. Tuesday from Friant Dam.

In a news release, the bureau wrote:

“As a result of the continuing drought, there is not enough water supply from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta alone to fulfill Reclamation’s contractual obligations to the Exchange Contractors.”

At the center of the east-west dispute is [a letter explaining the deal](#), which provides about 55,000 acre-feet of water to east-siders. Water districts from as far away as Kern County were involved in water trades to make the deal happen.

Without the water, 15,000 growers from Chowchilla to Bakersfield — many represented by [Friant Water Authority](#) — would have faced zero deliveries this year for the second season in a row.

Last year, Millerton water was sent to the west-side growers with historic rights for the first time since Friant Dam was built in the 1940s. Since the dam was built, the west-siders have been getting Northern California water. But there was not enough of the Northern California water last year or this year.

East-siders maintain the letter about the deal this year says they can keep any San Joaquin River water that gets to Millerton Lake. They say the extra 65,000 to 70,000 acre-feet of water from spring storms should be theirs.

West-siders replied that the letter had been “cherry-picked” to make the east-sider argument. They said they did not give up their historic water rights in this season over one deal.

Mark Grossi: [559-441-6316](tel:559-441-6316), [@markgrossi](https://twitter.com/markgrossi)