

Water flows in Fresno, Visalia for recharge

By Lewis Griswold lgriswold@fresnobee.com

For the first time in more than two years, water is flowing inside the Friant-Kern and Madera canals for groundwater recharge and farm irrigation.

But the shimmering liquid that is being shunted from the canals into local ditches does not signal an end to the California drought.

“We’re a long way from the drought being over,” said Gary Serrato, general manager of Fresno Irrigation District. “The snowpack is not even at average. We’re at 75 to 80 percent of average snowpack.”

San Joaquin River water became available to eastside water contractors because the federal Bureau of Reclamation has been releasing water from Millerton Lake into the canals to make room for spring snowmelt.

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Gary Serrato, Fresno Irrigation District

The flows began mid-March – in bureau parlance, the delivery is composed of 100,000 acre-feet of Class 2 water and 85,000 acre-feet of unreleased restoration flows – and will end by mid-May.

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But it’s not the end of San Joaquin River water in local waterways this season.

After two years of no water from the river, the Central Valley Project’s Friant Division contractors are being promised 40 percent of contract amounts, so water will continue to flow for at least a while.

Water managers hope for a boost to the allocation and are closely watching the San Joaquin Delta to see whether the exchange contractors on the lower San Joaquin River will get their Delta water. That would allow eastside farmers and others to get more river water than expected.

“Although the amount of water being stored behind the dam would support a much larger Class 1 allocation, the bureau has chosen to hold off on a larger allocation until it is clear that the exchange contractors can be fully supplied with Delta water,” said Thomas Esqueda, Fresno director of public utilities.

While that drama plays out, water contractors, including Fresno Irrigation District and the city of Fresno, have been putting the early flows to use.

Together, Fresno Irrigation District and the city are receiving 17,400 acre-feet of water, the district said. (That’s enough to fill 174 football fields to a depth of about one foot each.)

Some of the water is going to Fresno’s groundwater recharge basins and water treatment plant, and the rest to farmers for irrigation.

It’s the first time since February 2014 that more than a tiny amount of San Joaquin River water has been sent to Friant contractors, said Steve Ottemoeller, water resources manager for the Friant Water Authority.

“That’s a welcome change from the last two years,” he said.

In Visalia, 500 acre-feet of Friant-Kern water is being run in Packwood Creek, which has not had water for five years.

Tulare Irrigation District gave the water to Visalia for its groundwater-recharge efforts under a city-irrigation district exchange agreement. The run started Thursday and ends Wednesday.

“We get it that we have to recharge our groundwater,” Visalia Mayor Steve Nelsen said.

Starting next year, water being discharged from the city’s wastewater treatment plant that is near drinking-water quality will be given to Tulare Irrigation District for crop irrigation and groundwater recharge, and in turn the district will give water from the Friant-Kern canal to Visalia to use for recharge.

To get the water into the ground, the city and Kaweah Delta Water Conservation District built four check structures on Packwood Creek, upgraded a fifth and expanded a recharge pond.

The project was paid for by a groundwater fee on water bills in Visalia and a grant Kaweah Delta obtained.

Meanwhile, Lower Tule River Irrigation District west of Porterville just finished a 30,000- to 40,000-acre-feet run of Friant-Kern water, general manager Dan Vink said.

“It is sweet” that some of the water came from the unreleased restoration flows, he said. “But we still need the 100 percent allocation.”

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185,000

Acre-feet of San Joaquin River water flowing into Friant-Kern and Madera canals