

Valley farmers brace for 'devastating water news'

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San Joaquin Valley farmers are expecting devastating water news Friday -- the worst-ever forecast for federal water delivery, reflecting the landmark dry season.

Federal Central Valley Project leaders are expected to announce an unprecedented zero allocation for more than 2 million acres, spanning both east and west sides of the country's most productive farmland.

With reservoirs less than half full and the Sierra snowpack a quarter of its usual size, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has been immersed for weeks in the details of this widely anticipated announcement.

"We're working hard to figure out options," said spokesman Louis Moore.

But most farm contractors are planning for a broad delivery shutdown that could leave a half million acres barren and cost tens of millions of dollars in losses.

The record dry year weighs even on growers who rarely face cutbacks because they have water rights dating back to the 1870s.

These historic rights land owners on the west side have contracts to receive at least 75% of their allotments, even in droughts. They've gotten the 75% only four times since 1977. But they were warned late last week that only 40% of their water is available.

The farmers are part of the Los Banos-based San Joaquin River Exchange Authority, representing 240,000 acres from Mendota to Patterson.

To fulfill contracts for these farmers, federal leaders have the legal option of turning to Millerton Lake, which usually provides San Joaquin River water for 15,000 east-side growers.

Decades ago, the west-siders agreed to allow east-siders to use the water in exchange for Northern California river water. The risk of calling on Millerton Lake in an extremely dry year has always loomed, but it has never happened.

Cannon Michael, a farmer in the exchange contractor area, said no one wants to hurt another farmer's business. At the same time, he does not want to see the system of California water rights change.

"We need to honor the rights that have been in place over time," he said.

The federal estimates contained in a letter to the exchange contractors on Saturday showed a shortage of about 300,000 acre-feet of water.

If storms drop a lot of rain and snow in the next two months in this part of the state, the federal government might take a lot of Millerton water for the exchange contractors. East-side farmers may still be left at zero.

"So, we start at a negative 300,000 acre-feet," said Ron Jacobsma, general manager of Exeter-based Friant Water Authority, representing east-side growers.

Jacobsma said a zero allocation to the Friant authority would probably jeopardize thousands of acres of orchards and vines, which would amount to more of a loss than annual crops, such as tomatoes.

"That would set back production for several years," he said. "Amplify the effects of the freeze (in December) and the resulting unemployment and economic impact by a factor of three or four."

Water experts say that a stormy eight weeks in Northern California might help the Valley just as much. Shasta Reservoir, the Central Valley Project's biggest reservoir and which is located in far Northern California, might get enough water to make up the shortfall for the exchange contractors.

No one is sure how much it would help other west-side federal contractors, such as Westlands Water District, which is anticipating overdrafting the groundwater to keep crops alive.

Westlands leaders say they expect farm water demand to extract more than 500,000 acre-feet of water this year.

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