

Calif. to cut water deliveries to cities, farms

Associated Press, October 30, 2008

By SAMANTHA YOUNG, Associated Press Writer

SACRAMENTO, Calif. – California said Thursday that it plans to cut water deliveries to their second-lowest level ever next year, raising the prospect of rationing for cities and less planting by farmers.

The Department of Water Resources projects that it will deliver just 15 percent of the amount that local water agencies throughout California request every year.

Since the first State Water Project deliveries were made in 1962, the only time less water was promised was in 1993, but heavy precipitation that year ultimately allowed agencies to receive their full requests.

The reservoirs that are most crucial to the state's water delivery system are at their lowest levels since 1977, after two years of dry weather and court-ordered restrictions on water pumping out of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. This year, water agencies received just 35 percent of the water they requested.

Farmers in the Central Valley say they'll be forced to fallow fields, while cities from the San Francisco Bay area to San Diego might have to require residents to ration water.

Mike Young, a fourth-generation farmer in Kern County, called the projections disastrous.

"For the amount of acres we've got, we're not going to have enough water to farm," he said.

Young said he will be forced to fallow a fifth of his 5,000 acres. Water will go to his permanent crops — pistachio, almond and cherry trees — but most of his tomatoes and alfalfa will not get planted.

"We've got to start spending money on next year's crop now," Young said.

Jim Beck, general manager of the Kern County Water Agency, noted that fewer plantings would yield fewer crops and a decrease in the number of farm hands hired.

"We're seeing a phenomenon in the Central Valley where growers who have been in the business of agriculture are laying off workers who have been with them for 20 or 30 years because they don't have the water," Beck said. "It's one thing to see brown lawns and shorter showers in urban areas. The real impact in the Central Valley is people are having to find new jobs."

In Southern California, the Metropolitan Water District — the agency that supplies water to about half the state's population — has depleted more than a third of its water reserves. The agency's general manager, Jeff Kightlinger, said Californians must immediately reduce their water use to stretch what little water is available.

"We are preparing for the very real possibility of water shortages and rationing throughout the region in 2009," Kightlinger said, adding that his board will consider rationing during its meeting next month.

The State Water Project delivers water to more than 25 million residents and 750,000 acres of farmland.

In 2006, water agencies received their full allotment, in part because of heavy rains and a thick Sierra snow pack that year. But last year, a federal court limited water pumping out of the delta to protect the threatened delta smelt.

Even with Thursday's dire projection, a wet and snowy winter could mean that cities and farms ultimately get more water, said Ted Thomas, a spokesman for the state water department. But that wouldn't affect the court order.

"We are anticipating drastically reduced water supplies, regardless of weather conditions," Laura King Moon, assistant general manager of the State Water Contractors, said in a statement.

Department of Water Resources Director Lester Snow said the bleak outlook underscores the governor's call to retool California's massive water storage and delivery system.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger favors building more dams and designing a new way to funnel water through or around the environmentally fragile delta. The proposals have failed to gain traction in the Legislature.

Schwarzenegger this year called on water agencies to voluntarily cut water use 20 percent by 2020. He stopped short of issuing a mandatory conservation order, a strategy yet to be used by the state, Snow said.

"The governor has sounded the wake-up call, and the clock is ticking," Snow said in a statement.