

Water forecast boosted for west Valley farmers

Mark Grossi, Fresno Bee, 5-5-10

With a thick Sierra snowpack and reservoirs slowly filling, federal officials on Tuesday boosted the water forecast to 40% of contract levels for west San Joaquin Valley farmers.

It was good news for west-siders who were told in February to expect only 5% of their Central Valley Project allotments, due to drought and federal protections for dying fish in Northern California.

The increase on Tuesday was the second in three weeks. The U.S. Department of Interior had announced a 30% estimate of deliveries last month as April storms pounded California.

At this point, the additional water doesn't necessarily mean more acreage in production on the Valley's west side, but it will allow farmers to use less ground water.

"We might be able to get additional fall lettuce acreage if we can get contracts," said spokeswoman Sarah Woolf of Westlands Water District, the project's largest customer. "But the additional water is very important in terms of protecting ground water, and we're grateful."

The state also announced deliveries would be boosted to 40% for State Water Project customers -- the largest of which are in Southern California and Kern County.

State officials said even though the Sierra snowpack is the largest since 2006 -- 149% of average for this time of year -- California reservoirs are still recovering from three drought years.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said the water increase on the federal project was achieved through deals with water-rich east Valley districts, more precise operation of the CVP at the delta and capturing excess flows from the San Joaquin River restoration.

"While this improvement is welcome news," Salazar said Tuesday, "California's Central Valley is still struggling to overcome the effects of three years of drought and water system operational constraints needed to address water quality and fish species of concern in the delta."