

Feds, Blaming Dry Winter, Offer Dismal Forecast for Valley Farm Water Supply

Robert Rodriguez, Fresno Bee, 2-22-12

A puny Sierra snowpack has prompted federal officials to forecast that growers on the east and west side of the Valley this year will get about a third of the water supply they would normally receive.

Wednesday's dismal outlook -- the first of the season from the Bureau of Reclamation -- has west-side farmers potentially idling more land and east-side growers looking for additional sources of water.

Growers on the west side of the Valley are forecast to receive 30% of their allocation of Central Valley Project water, down from 45% promised in last year's initial forecast. Two years ago, the initial forecast was 5% and zero in 2009.

Farmers were hoping for more water, and the forecast could change. The Bureau of Reclamation usually makes a formal announcement of water allocations in mid-February, followed by updates as conditions change. Officials consider April 1 the end of the precipitation season, but updates sometimes are made in later months.

Last year, heavy storms pushed the allocation for west-side farmers to 80%.

Cathie Walker, co-owner with her siblings of 3RW DBA Riddle Farms, east of Orosi, says new irrigation lines underground and bonnets on the drip irrigation heads promise to maximize water use in a new cherry orchard. Despite changes in practice, farmers like Walker might still face another hard season if water sources are reduced.

This year, precipitation in Northern California is just 51% of the seasonal average as of Feb. 16. In the upper San Joaquin River basin, it's been even drier: The basin has reached just 43% of the seasonal average.

Although water district officials are hopeful things will improve, farmers are already making decisions based on the lower forecast.

West-side farmers anticipate idling more land, or switching to lower value crops that require less water.

"A significant decrease in irrigated acres not only impacts farmers, but also their workers and the businesses and communities that support irrigated agricultural production," said Tom Birmingham, general manager of the 600,000-acre Westlands Water District.

The district's 600 farms grow more than 60 different crops, from almonds to asparagus.

Longtime west-side grower Mark Borba said he is pulling back on his plan to add 400 acres of cotton, a crop that is making a resurgence in the Valley.

"I just can't do it with this reduced water allocation," Borba said. "And I have talked with other growers who have more land prepared for cotton than they can plant now."

Borba also foresees growers resorting to more groundwater pumping.

"We have a huge groundwater overdraft problem that is not good for this area," Borba said. "And now that could get worse."

The forecast for east-side growers, who receive water from Millerton Lake, is almost as bad. Federal officials estimate they would get 35% of their water, down from 100% last year.

The 35% allotment means Friant growers, who farm about 1 million east Valley acres from Merced County to Kern County, will receive about 280,000 acre-feet of high-priority water. An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons.

Many growers depend on that San Joaquin River water to irrigate citrus and other fruit trees. Federal officials added that about 70,000 acre-feet of water would be set aside at Millerton Lake for the ongoing San Joaquin River restoration that began in 2009.

Fortunately, growers were able to save an extra 125,000 acre-feet of water at Millerton from last year's big winter. That amount of water equates to about an additional 15% of the Friant allotment.

"Under these conditions, that's huge," said Friant Water Users Authority spokesman Steve Ottemoeller.

Friant water users said they are preparing as best they can.

"It's a good thing we replaced an old irrigation system that has been leaking," said Cathie Walker, who farms 600 acres of citrus in Tulare County with her brother, Kevin Riddle. "What can you do at this point?"

Walker said she knows dry weather is forecast for the next week or so. She said she hopes that changes soon.