

# San Joaquin River restoration flow stopped early to save water

**Mark Grossi, Fresno Bee, 2-3-14**

Federal authorities are shutting down water releases for the San Joaquin River restoration, making the water available for 30,000 people in small communities who face the possibility of summer with dry taps.

The restoration releases, which began in 2009, won't resume until at least March 2015, according to the federal Bureau of Reclamation, owner and operator of Friant Dam at Millerton Lake.

The communities include Orange Cove, Lindsay, Strathmore and Terra Bella, all of which buy river water from the Central Valley Project at Millerton. But like farm customers, they are expected to receive a zero allocation of water this record dry year.

In more than a half century, the communities and the 15,000 east San Joaquin Valley growers buying water from Millerton never have been completely shut out without deliveries.

The cutback on the river restoration project began Friday -- a month earlier than previously scheduled. Federal officials will fine-tune flow reductions during February, winding up with enough flow to cover the needs of those with contracts along the river from the dam to Gravelly Ford.

The restoration flows are part of a hard-fought 2006 agreement to reconnect the dried river with the Pacific Ocean and rebuild salmon runs.

The halt to the releases helps the Bureau of Reclamation fulfill a legal commitment to provide water for the health and safety of people. About 13,000 acre-feet of water will be made available for small communities and rural residents.

"We believe there's enough water now to cover the needs of all the small cities and rural residents who are on the project," said Ron Jacobsma, general manager of the Friant Water Authority, representing districts on the project.

There is no word yet on how much more the water would cost the small communities, but it could be up to \$600 per acre-foot, which is several times more than the usual price.

Orange Cove, a citrus-belt city of 10,000 in eastern Fresno County, will have little choice but to buy at least some water, City Manager Sam Escobar said.

"We don't have any other source," he said. "The wells around here are contaminated."

"Orange Cove City Council on Friday voted to impose an outdoor watering ban this year on residents. The city's Police Department will write citations to offenders, Escobar said.

In the Tulare County city of Lindsay, population 12,000, the council has been considering mandatory watering restrictions, public works director Mike Camarena said. The city's landscape sprinklers have been off for more than a month as the city prepares for the impacts of the drought, he said.

"We have two wells," Camarena said. "We can meet demand with the wells for a while, but we need water from the canal."

In addition to making water available for people, the federal cutback in restoration flow presents an opportunity for further study of young salmon. Wildlife officials will capture the offspring of 360 salmon that were planted last fall in the river beyond Friant Dam.

The young fish will be trucked downstream beyond the San Joaquin's dry stretches where tributaries, such as the Merced River, bring the river back to life. The tagged fish will be placed in the river and tracked to see if they return in a few years.

"While no one wants to experience these drought conditions," said Alicia Forsythe, Bureau of Reclamation manager of the restoration project, "we want to learn as much as possible so we can be better prepared for any future conditions once salmon return to the San Joaquin River."