

Calif. farmers, agencies brace for historic drought

Tim Hearden, Capital Press, 1-8-14

SACRAMENTO — Farmers and water regulators throughout California are bracing for water shutoffs in what's being called the worst drought in nearly four decades, as even transfers may become impossible because of poor runoff into bone-dry reservoirs.

Inflows into Shasta Lake and other reservoirs that feed the state and federal water projects are so low that even areas north of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta can expect allocation cutbacks, said David Guy, president of the Northern California Water Association.

And the Westlands Water District has told its customers in the San Joaquin Valley it's "a virtual certainty" that no federal water will be available to them this year, chief deputy general manager Jason Peltier said.

"For us the big buffer in a drought is fallowing land," Peltier said, adding that as many as 500,000 acres in the valley could be left unplanted this spring.

The conditions are creating further stress in already hard-hit communities such as Firebaugh and Mendota, said Gary Serrato, general manager of the Fresno Irrigation District.

"I've got to tell you in the Central Valley it's real," Serrato said. "We're living through it. They're disadvantaged communities to begin with, but when these folks are waiting in line for a box of food ... it's difficult times and it is a crisis."

The comments came as the state Board of Food and Agriculture was hearing from top state water officials Jan. 7 on steps they plan to take to ease the drought's impacts.

Tom Howard, executive director of the state Water Resources Control Board, said his agency can facilitate transfers as long as they don't harm third-party users or cause an unreasonable impact on fish and wildlife. On that second point, the agency can relax standards or selectively enforce them if the conditions warrant, he said.

Sending water south of the Delta is more complicated, however, because of recent court orders to preserve several fish species. But even transfers south of the Delta could be eased if Gov. Jerry Brown declares a state of emergency because of drought, he said.

Still, inflow into the state's reservoirs – which agencies largely use to determine allocations – is at lower levels than in 1977, which is considered the state's worst drought year in modern history. So even water contractors in parts of the Sacramento Valley will get little or no allotments, and others could be reduced to 50 percent, Guy said.

The reductions will kick in if Shasta Lake records a seasonal inflow of less than 3.2 million acre-feet, which is "a real coin toss at this point," said Paul Fujitani, deputy operations manager for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Mid-Pacific Region.

"I think a role of the state that's very important is to manage expectations," Guy said. "Right now, if you look at the water supply in the Sacramento Valley, to expect there will be all this water to transfer to other parts of the state ... there just simply isn't going to be much water available to transfer."

Even water rights holders will be affected, as the state will send them letters in the next several weeks telling

them there isn't enough surface water to meet their entitlements, Howard said.

A lack of rain this fall prompted Brown in December to set up a task force whose work could lead to a formal statewide drought declaration. In addition, the Department of Water Resources has established its own team to help farmers who must operate with markedly less water than needed for crops.

State Food and Agriculture Secretary Karen Ross said in a statement she's concerned that "considerable land fallowing and unsustainable groundwater overdraft" will complicate matters in rural farming communities.

"The unemployment issues, the food insecurity issues – that's what we are dedicated to do as a board is address those issues," board chairman Craig McNamara said. "We take this very, very seriously."

Reservoir levels

Here are the percentages of capacity for California reservoirs and comparisons to their seasonal averages as of midnight Jan. 6, according to the Department of Water Resources California Data Exchange Center.

Trinity Lake: 48 percent of capacity; 70 percent of average

Shasta Lake: 36 percent; 56 percent

Lake Oroville: 36 percent; 57 percent

New Bullards Bar Reservoir: 44 percent; 78 percent

Folsom Lake: 18 percent; 36 percent

New Melones Reservoir: 43 percent; 78 percent

Millerton Lake: 43 percent; 76 percent

Pine Flat Reservoir: 17 percent; 41 percent

Lake Isabella: 11 percent; 38 percent

San Luis Reservoir: 30 percent; 43 percent