

California agriculture, largely spared in new water restrictions, wields huge clout

David Siders and Jeremy B. White, Sacramento Bee, 4-3-15

When Gov. Jerry Brown issued the first statewide water use reduction order in California history on Tuesday, he put his emphasis squarely on cities and towns.

In this “new era” of drought, Brown said, “The idea of your nice little green grass getting lots of water every day, that’s going to be a thing of the past.”

Within 24 hours, the administration promoted new messages posted on more than 700 electronic freeway signs encouraging motorists to limit outdoor watering.

Largely missing from Brown’s appeal was the one industry that uses more water than anything else in this state but has already been brutalized by the drought – agriculture. As Californians mulled Brown’s unprecedented order, some wondered why farms were not being asked to sacrifice more.

Brown ordered farmers to report more information about their use of water. But he sheltered the agriculture industry from a mandatory 25 percent reduction in water use in cities and towns.

In developing the mandate, Brown viewed the agricultural and urban water systems as two different systems, administration officials said, largely because of the effect of diminished state and federal water allocations to farmers.

The exemption is significant. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, about 9 million acres of farmland in California are irrigated, representing about 80 percent of the water used by people. Farmers counter that they have already endured severe water cutbacks forcing them to fallow fields, uproot trees and let go of workers.

“We’ve had folks reduced 50, 80 and 100 percent of their water allocation,” said Danny Merkley, director of water resources for the California Farm Bureau Federation. “We don’t like to see this happening to anybody else, but others are starting to feel what we’ve been experiencing.”

Politically, agriculture occupies an influential rung in the hierarchy of industries lobbying – and contributing to – California’s elected officials. The \$40 billion industry employs about 420,000 and has made California the nation’s top agricultural producing state, sustaining its image as the nation’s breadbasket.

“Agriculture has a lot of clout,” said former Assemblyman Roger Dickinson, D-Sacramento. “I think that for most members, urban or rural, they see agriculture as a very important economic component in California,” and agricultural groups “have generally been unenthusiastic, to say the least, about things that would change the status quo with respect to water.”

Until last year, California was the lone Western state that did not regulate withdrawals of groundwater. But as reservoirs shriveled and the flow from state and federal plumbing systems evaporated – federal officials forecast they would make no deliveries this year – farmers increasingly drew water from beneath the earth.

Many began drilling deeper wells, depleting aquifers and in some cases causing the earth to sink.

With Brown urging them on, Dickinson and others responded with bills regulating California's groundwater, stoking opposition from agricultural groups and from both Republicans and moderate Democrats representing rural districts. Growers pushed successfully to give some agencies until 2022 to implement monitoring plans.

"We were unsuccessful in stopping it," Merkley said. "I think we were successful in making it better."

On Wednesday, Brown built off of the groundwater legislation with a more muscular effort to force water agencies to share groundwater data with the state.

Kurt Schwabe, an associate professor of environmental economics and policy at University of California, Riverside, said of Brown's approach to agriculture, "To say that they're getting a free ride here is just incorrect."

"By the same token," he said, "in the last seven years the way they've responded (to drought) is by pumping groundwater in the Central Valley, and pumping at a rate that is unsustainable."

John Carter, manager of the Yellowstone to Uintas Connection, a conservation group based in Paris, Idaho, said California should be further restricting water use on agricultural land, especially for crops used to feed animals.

"We know why they've been exempted," Carter said. "They have political power, and they've been there a long time."

While the Western Growers Association fought last year's groundwater package, senior vice president Dave Puglia called collecting more data a sensible mandate.

His objection was leveled at people who argue that farmers have not seen enough water restrictions.

"The only people in California who have actually turned the tap and seen air come out are farmers," Puglia said. "People who think farmers haven't been asked to do enough, they can talk to any of the 17,000 workers who don't have paychecks this year because farmers' water has been completely cut off."

Water agency customers both urban and agricultural could also see relief from Brown's directive hastening water transfers. As the drought has intensified, major water agencies have struck agreements to buy up water from those with some to spare.

That some agencies are paying hefty fees for spare water speaks to the fierce competition for a share of the state's dwindling supply. Farmers say they have felt the effects acutely, already fallowing hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland and, in the case of hundreds of Central Valley farmers, bracing for no water deliveries from the Central Valley Project this year.

"Zero percent, how do you get any less?" said Cannon Michael, who grows row crops in the Los Banos area. "I guess I don't understand the other side saying we're not participating in the pain of the drought."

Within hours of his announcement, Brown was asked on PBS' "NewsHour" if focusing on lawn watering wasn't a "drop in the bucket" compared to consumption on farms.

Brown said farmers already have "taken a lot of hits."

But he also acknowledged the industry's special place in the state when he said "agriculture is

fundamental to California.”

The value of California crops has more than doubled in the last 50 years, after adjusting for inflation, PPIC data show. But the California economy has grown even faster. Agriculture delivers 2 percent of the state’s gross domestic product.

Still, environmental groups that often clash with farm interests noted how much the agricultural industry has at stake.

“I think it’s important to keep in mind that ag really is on the front line of this drought,” said Claire O’Connor, a staff attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council. She called components of Brown’s executive order “pretty significant” for agriculture, despite the lack of a mandatory reduction order.

“This is a good first step,” she said.