

# California's parched farms, cities to get more water

**Jason Dearen Associated Press, 2-27-10**

SAN FRANCISCO — More water will be allocated to California's drought-stricken farms and cities this year, thanks to improved rain and snow levels, federal and state regulators said Thursday.

Water officials said they were hopeful about the situation but cautioned that California was not yet past its water crisis and allotments will remain much lower than requested.

"For the first time in three years we hope some relief is on the way for drought-stricken farmers in the delta," Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation said agriculture contractors south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta would receive 30 percent of the water requested if rainfall continues as forecast — an improvement on the 10 percent they got in 2009.

However, that allocation could fall significantly if the rest of the year is dry.

Meanwhile, the state Department of Water Resources said it will send 15 percent of the water sought — up from 5 percent last year. Customers could get as much as 45 percent in the spring if rainfall continues, the department said.

Both agencies run the pumps that send water to more than 25 million Californians and the farms that produce half the nation's fruits and vegetables.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., who had proposed legislation to force diversion of more water to farms if allocations had not been increased, said she was placing her bill on hold but reserving the right to bring it back if necessary.

Three years of drought have led to below average reservoir levels. In addition, pumping restrictions meant to protect threatened fish have contributed to the reduced flow of water to parched farms and thirsty cities.

Two of the state's key reservoirs are still below normal levels for this time of year. Lake Oroville was at 54 percent and the San Luis Reservoir at 80 percent.

Ted Thomas, a state water department spokesman, said the estimated allocations this year were kept conservative because officials do not want to later decrease the amounts. He said there was a 95 percent chance the allotments would increase this spring.

"When you look at agriculture for example, a lot of farmers take the allocations to the bank," Thomas said. "If they have a game plan based on an expectation of an amount of water and we have to reduce it, then they have big problems."

Laura King Moon, assistant general manager of State Water Contractors, which represents districts that provide water to Los Angeles and Alameda counties, said she was frustrated that allotments were so low despite improved rainfall.

She blamed restrictions brought about by federal protections for tiny, endangered delta smelt and chinook salmon.