

Water agencies loosen taps; Feinstein backs off

Peter Fimrite, San Francisco Chronicle, 2-27-10

State and federal water regulators agreed Friday to open the spigots a bit more on account of all the recent rain and snow, prompting Sen. Dianne Feinstein to drop her threat to bypass the Endangered Species Act to get farmers more water.

The announcements from Sacramento and Washington offered some relief to Central Valley farmers and ration-weary homeowners, but happy times for the tenders of hay fields and hot tubs are still a long way off, according to water regulators.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation will be giving farmers south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta 30 percent of the water they requested. That's compared with 10 percent in 2009, when many fields were left fallow. The percentage could rise to 40 percent, analysts said, as water is purchased from other sources.

The California Department of Water Resources raised its allotment to 15 percent of the water requested by water agencies representing some 25 million residents. That's up from the 5 percent originally proposed - but it is comparable to the amount of water allocated at this time last year.

"Valley farmers have suffered tremendously during California's three-year drought," U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar said in a statement. "The department has identified actions that will provide additional water on top of what an average water year would deliver."

The announcements came a day after federal officials predicted a huge increase in the number of salmon in the Sacramento River system despite a record low number last year, opening the possibility of a fishing season. The salmon season had been canceled for the past two years because of low numbers of spawning fish.

Environmental advocates and fishermen have blamed the drop in salmon numbers on increased water diversions to farmers that they say have sucked baby salmon into pumps.

Change of plans

Regulators on Friday denied that the optimistic forecasts had anything to do with Feinstein's threat to amend the law and increase pumping for farmers, but the rosy outlook nevertheless convinced her to scotch her controversial proposal.

"Much creative thinking and work has been done by many people to make this happen, for which I thank the many people involved," Feinstein said in a statement. "I will watch this situation carefully and I am placing my proposed amendment on hold; however, I reserve the right to bring it back should it become necessary."

The water content of the California snowpack is currently above average for this time of year, especially in the northern Sierra, which is 121 percent of normal. That's important because rain and snow runoff in the northern Sierra feeds the state's largest reservoir, Shasta Lake, which, at its current 72 percent capacity, is at 98 percent of average for this date.

Lake Oroville, the State Water Project's primary source of drinking water, is only 38 percent full. That's 54 percent of the average storage for this date.

Different roles

Water from Shasta is used by the federal Central Valley Project to irrigate about 3 million acres of farmland from Redding to Bakersfield and provide drinking water for close to 2 million people. The State Water Project, in contrast, is oriented more toward urban and industrial uses, providing drinking water to about 25 million Californians and water to 700,000 acres of farmland.

The discrepancy in the levels of the two big reservoirs, analysts say, is because abundant rainfall can fill Shasta while Oroville relies more on snow runoff in the spring. Water managers said a lot of the runoff is being absorbed into the ground, which is still parched after three years of drought.

Mark Cowin, the director of the state Department of Water Resources, said the 15 percent state allocation would be the lowest in history. The department ultimately delivered 40 percent of what was requested last year - a year in which many Bay Area communities were forced to ration water. Cowin said the amount could be increased to as high as 40 percent if the storms keep coming. If they stop, though, he said, things could get worse.

"Despite a relatively wet winter, our reservoir storage levels remain low," Cowin said. "After three years of drought conditions and a number of mandated pumping restrictions, even a wet year won't get us out of the woods."

Some still upset

Environmentalists and fishermen expressed relief that Feinstein will not be going through with her threat to mandate increased pumping, but they were still upset that farming got the nod over regulations protecting salmon habitat.

"We're happy that the water year is looking better than the last three years. It is good news for the environment and it is good news for the cities," said Spreck Rosekrans, the senior analyst for the Environmental Defense Fund. "We're disappointed that the Endangered Species Act has been put in the balance subject to this year's hydrology. It's a bad precedent."