

Farmers plead to send water to valley fields

John Holland, Modesto Bee, 1-15-10

LOS BANOS — Farming advocates pleaded with federal officials Thursday to send water to drought-wracked parts of the San Joaquin Valley.

More than 200 people turned out for a briefing by lawmakers and other officials on the severe shortages in parts of the western and southern valley.

"The people in this room are angry and frustrated," said Tom Birmingham, general manager of the Westlands Water District, southwest of Fresno. "They are seeing their livelihoods vanish."

The situation is not so dire in some parts of the valley, including the Modesto, Turlock and Oakdale irrigation districts. Speakers warned, however, that state and federal agencies could seek some of their water to help fish in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Reps. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced, and Jim Costa, D-Fresno, were the hosts of the event at the Los Banos Fairgrounds.

Farmers and local water managers said they are suffering from cutbacks aimed at protecting salmon, smelt and other fish in the delta.

This has hit hardest for farmers who rely on the federal Central Valley Project, which pumps water from the delta. They got just 10 percent of their contracted amount last year.

Farmers urged officials to build more reservoirs to store water from wet years. They also favor improvements to the delta, a web of channels where giant pumps threaten fish and fragile levees hold back water.

These projects, some of which could be funded by an \$11 billion bond issue on the November ballot, likely will take years to carry out.

For the near future, farmers urged that the Endangered Species Act be relaxed so more water can flow.

"More important is the short term now, because we have farmers on the brink of going out of business," Earl Perez, who uses federal water on several crops on the West Side of Stanislaus County, said after the briefing.

Looking to other sources

Perez said he has tried to survive by increasing his groundwater use and buying expensive water from other areas.

Aaron Barcellos, who grows several crops in the Los Banos area with mostly federal water, said he has fallowed some of his land and turned to wells. He supports new reservoirs and improved deliveries across the delta.

Birmingham said the reduced irrigation has left many farmworkers without paychecks and burdened social service providers.

"We have people who are standing in food lines, getting to the front of the food lines and being told, 'Sorry, we have run out of food,' " he said.

Several speakers said delta fish continue to decline despite the water cutbacks, so increasing deliveries to farms should be an option.

Cardoza suggested a look at whether the fish are being harmed by non-native predators, urban pesticide use and waste- water discharges.

David Nawi, a senior adviser to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, said help could come from a review of delta fish protections, which was started by the National Academy of Sciences last month.

Nawi also noted that construction will start soon on a connection between the main state and federal canals from the delta, so operators can take advantage of extra capacity in one or the other.

Lester Snow, resources secretary for Gov. Schwarzenegger, said fish protections have caused some of the cutbacks, but the bigger problem is that the drought has entered a fourth year.

"We have a dry watershed as a byproduct of that," he said. "We have way below normal reservoir storage for this time of year."

The MID, TID and OID draw from San Joaquin River tributaries, so they are less affected by delta fish protections. Still, they could lose some of their water via state and federal decisions aimed at protecting the lower San Joaquin.

"The regulatory agencies are looking to dramatically increase the flows on the San Joaquin River," said Tim O'Laughlin, an attorney who works with several valley water agencies.