

Feds give farmers good, bad water news

Government will boost delivery, but farmers say they already paid for it.

Michael Doyle and Mark Grossi, Fresno Bee, 1-27-10

WASHINGTON -- Interior Secretary Ken Salazar sought to mollify San Joaquin Valley farmers but ended up disappointing them again Tuesday when he declared federal pumps will deliver more water this year.

Facing considerable political pressure from California farmers and lawmakers alike, Salazar announced that between 350,000 and 400,000 acre-feet of additional water will be delivered. He said the water would come on top of the standard water allocation scheduled for February.

"The steps we are taking will help provide water users and growers critical assurances for the year ahead," Salazar said in a prepared statement.

But San Joaquin Valley farmers, while conceding the Interior Department's announcement offered a sliver of help, largely denounced it as more spin than substance. The farmers said the water described by the Interior Department will not increase irrigation supplies, as farmers already have purchased most of it.

"I would like to give the secretary the benefit of the doubt, that maybe he was confused," said Tom Birmingham, general manager of the giant Westlands Water District. "Otherwise, this looks like an intentional effort to mislead the public."

Salazar's announcement comes amid a charged political environment. Republicans and Democrats alike have been urging the Interior Department to ease environmental restrictions and provide farmers more water. Pressed by Congress, The National Research Council is reviewing the department's environmental decisions.

The combination of three years of drought and protections for endangered species, including the delta smelt and winter-run salmon, drove federal officials to cut water deliveries to west-side farmers by 90% last year. This year's first water-delivery estimates are expected in February.

Salazar called the water announcement proof that "the Obama administration is committed to being a full partner with the state and stakeholders." His presumed partners, though, lacked his enthusiasm.

In part, the Interior Department simply moved up on the calendar a water scheduling announcement usually made later in the year. Much of the water touted by Salazar already has been bought by farmers and is being stored in the San Luis Reservoir.

"It's helpful," allowed Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, "but it's not nearly enough, and we're very, very unhappy about how this has been handled by the administration." Westlands, on the west side of Fresno County, would be the biggest beneficiary of the irrigation deliveries, but Birmingham said the Interior Department's announcement is simply a confirmation that there is space in San Luis Reservoir for water already purchased.

"I am pleased to hear the announcement early," Birmingham conceded.

Dan Nelson, executive director of the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority, which serves farmers

including those in Westlands, said farmers bought 150,000 acre-feet of water last summer and kept it in the reservoir to make sure they were supplied this year.

Farmers bought additional water from elsewhere in California.

"Some of that water was worth \$300 an acre-foot," Nelson said.

There may be political posturing on all sides, as the Interior Department emphasizes its service to farmers while the farmers understate the benefits they're receiving. Still, the Interior Department announcement aggressively characterizes administrative actions.

Salazar said recent storms in California have boosted precipitation levels to allow delivery of water stored in the San Luis Reservoir.