

Interior opens spigots for San Joaquin Valley

Colin Sullivan, Environment & Energy Publishing, 3-16-10

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar today boosted the federal water share for California farms and municipalities, raising the allocation from reservoirs owned by the Bureau of Reclamation for buyers throughout the drought-stricken San Joaquin Valley.

The decision adds water supplies to farms north and south of the San Joaquin-Sacramento Delta to account for heavy winter rains and reservoirs running at or beyond full capacity. Some contractors to the north and east of the delta are set to receive 100 percent of their contracts, while farmers to the south of the delta, operating on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, have seen their share increase from 5 percent to 25 percent.

Salazar said the announcement should deliver more certainty to farmers concerned that their water deliveries will be curtailed this spring and summer. In late February, he promised today's action if the wet weather continued.

"The allocations have significantly increased throughout the valley," Salazar told reporters during a press briefing.

Salazar also addressed legislation introduced by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) that would limit enforcement of Endangered Species Act protections for the delta smelt to increase water pumping in the region. Feinstein has shelved the bill for now, but her office has said she reserves the right to bring it back if the Obama administration and reservoirs owned by the state do not keep the water flowing.

Feinstein's measure seeks to ensure that farmers and water districts to the south of the delta get between 38 and 40 percent of their contracted allocations. Because today's level of 25 percent stops short of that level, the senator may react, but Salazar said he is banking on her keeping the measure to the side.

"My sense is she is comfortable with the progress we have been making," said Salazar, who promised to attain an additional 8 to 10 percent for agriculture to the south of the delta. "I frankly think what we are doing here is pursuing a practical solution that will obviate the need for that legislation."

Feinstein's office issued a statement shortly after Salazar's news conference that indicated support without citing the legislation. "This is good news, and this updated allocation provides more certainty and should help farmers secure the loans they need," Feinstein said.

Environmentalists were also supportive. Doug Obegi, an attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council, said the announcement "provides some good news for farmers and fishermen in California."

"We're pleased that more water can be delivered to farmers this year, without compromising environmental protections for salmon, the Bay-Delta estuary, and the fishermen and communities that depend on their health," Obegi said.

Salazar also made a rare foray into state politics today, indicating support for an \$11 billion water bond on the California general election ballot this November. The bond, supported by Feinstein and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R), is opposed by some in the environmental community who view it as a boondoggle for developers.

"I think it is part of a long-term solution," Salazar said. "The water bond is an essential part of" that solution.

State supply holding firm

The California Department of Water Resources issued its own statement after Salazar's decision indicating state reservoirs would not follow suit.

DWR Director Mark Cowin said that unlike Lake Shasta, which is CVP's largest reservoir, the state-owned Lake Oroville reservoir was still struggling with "poor hydrologic conditions" that have it at 43 percent of capacity and 57 percent of normal for this time of year.

Shasta, on the other hand, is at 104 percent of average for this time of year and 81 percent of capacity.

"It is clear that both the state and federal water projects face great challenges in delivering the amount of water that our farms, businesses and residents need this year," Cowin said. "We will continue to work aggressively in looking for opportunities to improve water supplies to the State Water Project contractors this year."

The initial 2010 allocation, announced in December 2009, was 5 percent of contractor requests for state-controlled reservoirs. DWR raised the initial allocation to 15 percent in February.