

Farmers hail increased water allowance

Peter Fimrite, San Francisco Chronicle, 3-17-10

The sprinklers will go on this summer in the Central Valley, but not as much as farmers would like.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced Tuesday that growers south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta will receive 25 percent of the water they were hoping to get.

That may not sound good on the surface, but it is better than the 5 percent the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation was planning to give them before a series of winter storms drenched the state and left a blanket of snow in the Sierra.

"This is good news for the large majority of water users served by the Central Valley Project, but we realize that south-of-Delta agricultural water service contractors face serious water supply challenges," Salazar said during a joint news conference with Deputy Interior Secretary David Hayes and Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Mike Connor.

Three years of drought and federally mandated limits on pumping to protect endangered fish caused some farmers to abandon fields and others to trim jobs.

Tensions between farmers and conservationists reached a high point when Sen. Dianne Feinstein threatened to bypass environmental laws to get farmers more water.

The news of a 25 percent allocation was rushed out a week early at the urging of Feinstein, Sen. Barbara Boxer and Reps. Jim Costa, D-Hanford (Kings County), and Dennis Cardoza, D-Atwater (Merced County).

"This updated allocation provides more certainty and should help farmers secure the loans they need," Feinstein said in a statement. "I'm pleased that the Interior Department has recognized the urgency of the water crisis."

The allocation could be increased if snow runoff exceeds expectations or more storms arrive between now and May.

"We continue to work hard and make progress toward providing an additional 8 to 10 percent for agriculture south of the delta," Salazar said.

The water content of the California snowpack is currently above average for this time of year, especially in the northern Sierra, which feeds the state's largest reservoir, Shasta Lake. The Central Valley Project reservoir is currently 81 percent full and 104 percent of average for this date.

Water from Shasta irrigates about 3 million acres of farmland from Redding to Bakersfield. It provides drinking water for close to 2 million people.

The announcement also increased the amount of water going to farmers, residents and industry north and south of the delta. Regulators warned nevertheless that it is no time to bask in the shower or leave the water running in the yard.

As of now, Lake Oroville, the State Water Project's primary source of water for 25 million Californians and

700,000 acres of farmland, is 43 percent full. That's 57 percent of the average storage for this date.

Salazar, Feinstein and Boxer vowed Tuesday to continue working to increase water storage and supply in California, a problem that some insist cannot be solved without first building a peripheral canal to bypass the delta.