

Officials called to conference on California drought

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WASHINGTON — The Obama administration on Wednesday urged California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to call state lawmakers into a special session to deal with the state's water crisis.

Meanwhile, the administration will ask the National Academies of Sciences to look at alternatives to protecting endangered species in California that would allow more water delivery from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to the state's farm belt.

The administration took the two steps as it summoned state officials and interest groups to an often acrimonious hearing at the Interior Department. The hearing focused on how to deal with a water shortage causing high unemployment and economic distress in the state's San Joaquin Valley.

Precipitation rates over the past three years in California have ranged from 63 percent to 78 percent of the state's average. Compounding the problem, restrictions on water delivery were put in place to protect a native fish. The two factors have led farmers to idle more than a quarter-million acres and put thousands out of work.

Lawmakers from the San Joaquin Valley focused on the latter as the primary cause of their constituents' problems. They asked federal officials to waive enforcement of the Endangered Species Act for a year or two until more long-term solutions could be found to bring more water to the region. Some likened the problems in their districts to a raging fire.

"Instead of red lights and fire trucks, I see too much business as usual," said Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Calif.

Others said they appreciated longer-term steps being taken to improve the region's water supply, but that it's not enough.

"If you don't act now on agriculture, it's going to be thrown under the bus. That's why there's a lot of angst out there," said Republican Rep. George Radanovich.