

Desperate California to get more water at last

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By [Dan Whitcomb](#)

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - Drought-stricken farmers and cities across California were granted a measure of relief on Friday when federal and state officials said they expected to supply significantly more water this year than last.

The announcements came as welcome news in the nation's No. 1 farm state, where dramatic cutbacks in water deliveries by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the state Water Resources Department had idled thousands of farm workers and 300,000 acres of cropland.

Shortages have also forced cities and counties to ration water, raise rates and impose strict mandatory conservation measures that turned lawns brown and left cars unwashed.

But a series of strong winter storms that could mark the end of a three-year drought has left several feet of snow on the Sierra Nevada mountain range that serves as California's principal source of surface water.

In light of that deluge, this year the Bureau of Reclamation will supply most California users with 100 percent of the water they are contracted to receive, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar said.

Irrigation districts south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, which represent farmers on the west side of the state's Central Valley, would get 30 percent of their allotment, or three times more than last year.

The Central Valley is one of the country's most important agricultural regions, and the state produces more than half of the fruits, vegetables and nuts grown in the United States.

Separately, California officials said they were increasing the amount of water they expected to deliver from the State Water Project this year from 5 to 15 percent of normal.

If average precipitation continues for the rest of the winter, a California Department of Water Resources spokesman said, the state's final allocation for the year could rise to 35-45 percent of requested amounts.

NOT OUT OF THE WOODS

"This is an important step for California and San Joaquin Valley farmers," Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger said in a written statement.

"I raised this critical issue during my meeting with President Obama this week, and am very glad to see this action from his administration...", he said. "Now we must direct our attention to the long-term improvement of our water infrastructure to avoid these year-to-year uncertainties."

Meanwhile state water officials said that California's long struggle to supply its people with water was not over.

"After three years of drought conditions and a number of mandated pumping restrictions, even a wet year won't get us out of the woods," Department of Water Resources Director Mark Cowin said. "We need increased conservation, a more reliable water delivery system and a comprehensive solution for California's water crisis."

The dire straits of Central Valley farmers had prompted U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein to draft legislation that would ease environmental restrictions to allow more water to be pumped out of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta for growers -- a plan the lawmaker said she would now drop.

"I will watch this situation very carefully and I am placing my proposed amendment on hold," Feinstein said in a statement released through her office. "However, I reserve the right to bring it back should it become necessary."

Feinstein's plan would have temporarily loosened Endangered Species Act rules designed to protect salmon and smelt and it became the latest flashpoint in California's long-running water wars -- infuriating fishing groups, environmentalists and even members of the powerful Democrat's own party.

Opponents had charged that the senator's plan could ultimately lead to the extinction of Sacramento River salmon and the collapse of the Pacific Coast fishing industry.

The state supplies more than 25 million people and over 750,000 acres of farmland with water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, which is fed by rainfall and snow-melt runoff from the Sierra Nevadas.

California water officials say the series of storms that have clobbered the normally sunny state have left snowpack at above-normal levels, but they have so far stopped short of calling an official end to the drought.

(Additional reporting by Steve Gorman; Editing by Eric Walsh)

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