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Feds plan \$10M in aid for thirsty farms

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FRESNO — The federal government on Thursday announced \$10 million in aid to farmers suffering from water shortages in the San Joaquin Valley.

The money will help farmers, mainly along the west valley, with efforts such as drip irrigation and preventing soil erosion from fallowed fields.

"With the challenges to California farmers caused by three years of drought, we are making available much-needed assistance to some of the hardest-hit producers," said Dave White, chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, who met with farmers in Fresno.

Water allotments last year were cut to 10 percent of the contract amount for some parts of the valley served by the federal Central Valley Project. This happened in part because of the drought and in part to protect salmon and other fish in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Many parts of the valley have suffered less because they do not tap the delta directly. They include the Modesto, Turlock, Oakdale and South San Joaquin irrigation districts.

The aid announcement came amid calls for increased water flows to the west valley by many farmers and officials. They cite the easing of the drought this winter and the possibility that other factors, including pollution and predators, are harming delta fish.

"(The aid) is far from a solution to helping our farmers who remain in desperate need of water," said Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced. "However, it may provide some relief."

The funding will be available in San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Tulare, Kings and Kern counties.

It will be allotted through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, which is accepting applications until April 9.

The \$10 million follows \$3 million in drought aid from the same program last year.

Sarah Woolf, spokeswoman for the Westlands Water District, west of Fresno, said she was thankful that White is concerned about the region's water troubles.

"He is very disheartened by what is happening here," she said.

And while the conservation service provides funding for important water-saving technology, Woolf said, some farmers don't have the water to irrigate.

"We have acres on drip irrigation that went without any crops because there was no water," she said.

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Daniel Errotabere, an almond farmer on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley reaches for an irrigation valve on his farm, the crop being grown is tomatoes. The more drought years we have and more water dependt we are the drip irrigation system becomes problematic. Daniel Errotabere is one of these farmers with such an issue on his land. March 8, 2007. (Bryan Patrick / bpatrick@sacbee.com) - -

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