

Calif. Farmers Brace for Little or No Water

SCOTT SMITH, Associated Press

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — Federal officials plan to announce Friday how much water they can release this year through a vast system of rivers, canals and reservoirs, but Central Valley farmers on the front lines of [California's historic drought](#) [1] expect to get little, if anything.

This time of year the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation carefully measures the mountain snow pack, rainfall and reservoir levels all over California to determine the water available for farmers, fish migrations and communities.

Gayle Holman of the Fresno-based Westlands Water District, the nation's largest supplier of water for agricultural use, said the district has been preparing farmers for grim news that they'll receive no water this year from the federal government.

"They're all on pins and needles trying to figure out how they're going to get through this," Holman said, adding that Westland's 700 farmers will choose to leave fields unplanted, draw water from wells or pay top dollar for water that's on the market.

Last year, Westland farmers received just 20 percent of what is considered normal from the federal government's Central Valley Project, while federal water releases for endangered fish remained at 100 percent, causing frustration among farmers.

Gov. Jerry Brown last month declared California's drought emergency, and both state and federal officials have pledged millions of dollars to help with water conservation and food banks for those put out of work by the drought.

California officials who manage the State Water Project, the state's other vast water system, have already said they won't be releasing any water for farmers, marking a first in its 54-year history.

Steve Chedester, executive director of the San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors Water Authority in Los Banos, said he anticipates receiving 40 percent of the full water allotment from the federal government to irrigate 240,000 acres of farmland. That's because the Water Authority dates back to the 1870s and has senior water rights over many other contractors and districts.

In a longstanding agreement, the Water Authority is supposed to receive at least 75 percent, and if it doesn't, Chedester said the federal government has to find authority water from alternatives sources.

Farmers he serves understand the reality of California's drought means it's going to be tough to find enough water for them, Chedester said. "They're taking a very practical approach," he said. "If it's not there, it's just not there."

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