

Feds Announce \$20M for Calif. Farmers

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — Federal officials lent a hand to California's drought crisis Tuesday, announcing that \$20 million in aid focused on water conservation will be available to California farmers and ranchers who are the hardest hit.

U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told reporters that this will be the first in a number of announcements to be made regarding drought relief, including one expected Thursday aimed at forestry assistance.

The first round of money, to be given in grants under the Natural Resources Conservation Services Environmental Quality Incentives Program, will be directed at improving irrigation methods, heading off erosion of unplanted fields and creating better ways to water livestock, Vilsack said.

He was joined by California Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary Karen Ross and Rep. Jim Costa, a Fresno Democrat and third-generation farmer. "What we're really talking about right now is a lifeline," Costa said.

California is going through its third-straight dry year. Gov. Jerry Brown has declared a drought emergency, and state officials announced last week that they would not be sending water to California's agricultural customers. U.S. officials are expected in late February to announce that they will allot only a fraction of the federally controlled water that farmers want, if any.

The drought has fanned the flames of long-standing water battles between Republican and Democrat lawmakers, but Costa said this is no time to talk in "tired old" sound bites. "At the end of the day, they don't provide one more drop of water," he said.

Farmers and ranchers can apply by March 3 for the federal money. Priority will be given to farmers whose water allocations have been cut by at least 85 percent.

Source URL (retrieved on 01/30/2015 - 11:05pm):

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