

## Dry spell: California farmers struggle with impending drought

By Ken McLaughlin  
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GUSTINE — Farmer Lax Iyer is standing on the side of a country road that splits his almond orchard into two different worlds — one abloom, the other in danger of choking in a cloud of dust.

The trees on his left appear sickly because they depend on water from the Central Valley Project — increasingly scarce "federal water" that comes from hundreds of miles away. The trees on his right are healthy trees that get all the water they need, because they rely on an irrigation district that enjoys water rights stemming from when Franklin D. Roosevelt was president.

Within months, the trees that rely on the federal water — an investment of more than a million dollars — could be dead.

Never since the Central Valley Project was authorized in 1935 have California's farmers been so worried about the lack of water. Three years of too little rain combined with pumping restrictions in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta have created a nightmare scenario: The federal government might soon cut off the state's largest supply of agricultural water — for the first time in California history.

"I really don't know what I'm going to do," said Iyer, 50, an Indian immigrant who fears his cherished 13-year-old business — his American dream — could collapse.

But as Iyer's patchwork of water sources so dramatically illustrates, when it comes to water and farming in California, even in the midst of a drought there are haves and have-nots. Some farmers draw their water from abundant wells. Some get their water from the huge state and federal water plumbing projects that decades ago irrigated dry valley land and built California's agricultural industry. Some of the luckiest have long-term water rights obtained in the '30s and '40s. Others are hooked into more environmentally progressive water distribution systems, like the one in the Salinas Valley.

The drama sure to play out in the next few months will demonstrate which parts of the state's water network are fragile and which are secure — and may lay the course for California's water future.

### Low snowpack

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation won't announce this year's water allocation until Feb. 20. But late last month, state water officials announced that California's snowpack — which feeds the state's elaborate systems of reservoirs and canals — was only 61 percent of normal. The drought, officials warned, could become the worst in modern California history.

Water shortages are a severe threat to the state's agricultural industry, which uses 80 percent of the water consumed by Californians to produce more than half of the country's vegetables, nuts and fruits. The industry, the state's largest, generates more than \$36 billion annually in sales. It provides 1.1 million jobs in a state with one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation — 9.3 percent.

Already many farmers are letting their fields lie fallow. Fresno County's farmers plan to grow about half the lettuce they did last year. Other farmers are

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panicking and spending millions of dollars to dig expensive wells that mostly yield poor-quality water.

A new University of California-Davis study estimates that \$1.6 billion in agriculture-related wages — and as many as 60,000 jobs across the Central Valley — will be lost in the coming months because of the drought.

In the hard-hit west side of the valley near Fresno, the drought's epicenter, the farming economy is already crumbling. The unemployment rate in Mendota, the self-styled Cantaloupe Capital of the World, now stands at 35 percent.

Businesses in Mendota that sell chemicals and irrigation equipment are reeling. Feed, fertilizer and small trucking companies are seeing their business dry up. "And, of course, it all trickles down to hairdressing shops, restaurants and other small businesses in town," said Sarah Woolf of the Westlands Water District, which provides water to more than 600 family-owned farms in western Fresno and Kings counties.

The district, like 3 million agricultural acres around California, depends on the federal Central Valley Project. The project, which mostly provides water to farmers, is complemented by the nearly half-century-old State Water Project, a similar system that irrigates 755,000 acres of farmland and provides water to 23 million Californians. State water officials in October said they expected farmers' water allocation to be about 15 percent of their contracted amount, but it could be less. Many farmers expect the federal allocation to be "zero percent."

The delta is the switching yard for California water, the place where the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers come together.

A finger-size fish called the delta smelt is on the

verge of extinction, so a federal judge has restricted pumping that kills the fish, reducing the amount of water that flows south to farmers in canals.

"We're only in the third year of a drought and really starting to feel its impacts," said Westlands' Woolf. "Normally that doesn't happen until the fourth or fifth year."

The environmental restrictions have angered farmers.

"It does hurt," said Iyer, the almond farmer. "You would hope that people are more important than fish."

Doug Obegi, a staff attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council in San Francisco, said environmentalists aren't insensitive to the plight of farmers: "It's just that we've created a water policy that doesn't work for fish or people."

Dams, conservation

So what's going to happen?

Farmers, of course, are praying that more rain in the next several weeks will allow federal and state water officials to increase allocations — at least enough to let them save orchards, if not this year's crops.

Farmers and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger are also pushing to build new dams and reservoirs. And a strong movement has revived the idea to construct a Peripheral Canal to redirect water flowing from the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers directly to man-made aqueducts headed south. But environmental groups have vowed to fight the proposals.

Newman almond farmer Jim Jasper, 63, sighed: "Mark Twain once said that in California 'whiskey is

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for drinking. Water is for fighting over.' "

But sometimes, Obegi said, a crisis can get warring sides to focus on solutions everyone can agree on. The Natural Resources Defense Council, he said, is advocating the concept of the "virtual river" — a combination of water-use efficiency, water recycling, improved groundwater management and the capture of storm water that normally runs into the ocean.

Amid the debate, the fertile Salinas Valley — which didn't participate in either the state or federal water projects — is a model of water management that is good for the environment and good for farmers. The water in Monterey County's reservoirs is low but should be adequate to get farmers through the year.

"I think our ancestors had the foresight to put in a system that constantly recharges our aquifers," said fourth-generation farmer Dirk Giannini, 36.

It was a crisis in the Salinas Valley that led to a solution that has won plaudits from both environmentalists and farmers.

The problem was saltwater intrusion, where seawater gradually replaces freshwater pumped from wells near coastal land. The solution was to send Monterey County's wastewater through advanced treatment — yes, that includes toilet water — to irrigate farmland in the northern part of the Salinas Valley around Castroville.

By next year, the availability of water to farmers will be even greater after a rubber dam is completed on the Salinas River. The dam, which will be able to go up and down to address environmental concerns, will inject even more water into the sophisticated recycling system, in addition to recharging aquifers.

But the farmers in Steinbeck Country aren't gloating.

"We really feel for those guys in the Central Valley," said Chris Drew, 33, production manager for Sea Mist Farms in Castroville. "We are eternally grateful for the people who planned for us to have this water."

Contact Ken McLaughlin at [kmclaughlin@mercurynews.com](mailto:kmclaughlin@mercurynews.com) or (408) 920-5552.

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