

Governments Deal New Blow to Drought-Stricken California Farmers

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SAN FRANCISCO — In a blow to California farmers struggling with a persistent drought, federal authorities released projections on Friday showing that little or no water would be available from federal sources this year for agricultural use.

State water supplies were also expected to be severely curtailed, state officials said.

The announcements — from the federal Bureau of Reclamation and the California Department of Water Resources — confirmed fears long held by farmers, who had been warned in recent months to expect little water from state and federal reservoirs, which are collectively less than half full.

“It’s grim news,” said Tim Quinn, the executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies, whose members serve both urban and agricultural needs and represent about 93 percent of water delivered in the state.

Federal officials said new estimates showed that the Central Valley Project, the large irrigation system operated by the reclamation bureau, would be able to provide zero to 10 percent of its contracted deliveries.

If the zero estimate proves true, it would effectively eliminate hundreds of farmers’ principal water supply. Water supplies to wildlife refuges, cities and industrial sources would also see smaller cutbacks, but agriculture would be hardest hit.

“If this isn’t the bottom,” Mr. Quinn said, “I don’t want to be around for the bottom.”

The estimates are based on runoff from rain and snow, which has been below normal in California since 2007, though recent storms — and a soggy weekend forecast — could improve things. The estimates will be updated late next month.

State officials said even heavy rains in the coming weeks would not be enough to change the estimates significantly.

“The reservoirs are so low we probably need a couple of years of above-normal precipitation,” said Lester A. Snow, the director of the Department of Water Resources, which serves the water needs of some 23 million Californians, both in agricultural areas and in cities.

Mr. Snow predicted that conservation measures would need to be intensified, something also suggested this month by Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa of Los Angeles. Mr. Snow, whose department would deliver just 15 percent of contractors’ requests, said he had pressed for more water storage and water recovery efforts like desalinization and wastewater recycling.

“If we don’t have a significant change in snowpack, the expectation is that most of Southern California is going to have to go to mandatory conservation,” Mr. Snow said. “They can’t afford to have sprinklers go off in rainstorms or irrigating sidewalks.”

In agricultural areas, meanwhile, studies have shown that the drought and restrictions on water use prompted by environmental concerns could result in tens of thousands of job losses and more than 800,000 acres of farmland taken out of production. Consumers could also be affected: California is the nation’s leading producer of a variety of fruits, vegetables and other foods.

The office of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said he would announce emergency measures next week addressing the drought. Other officials, meanwhile, were looking elsewhere for help.

“Maybe the best thing is to try to remain optimistic, especially with the incoming storm,” said A. G. Kawamura, the state secretary of agriculture. “Let’s just pray it’s a good one.”