

**Headline: The agency says that if dry weather continues, local districts may have to consider rationing for the first time in years.**

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Concerned about future supplies, the Metropolitan Water District announced Monday that it would cut shipments to Southern California agriculture by 30% and that customers would eventually pay higher rates.

The action by the giant water wholesaler, which provides water to 18 million people across Southern California, marks its first step in dealing with upcoming reductions in water supply and the record dry conditions locally.

MWD General Manager Jeffrey Kightlinger said that if the dry weather continues into this winter, local agencies would have to consider mandatory rationing, an extreme measure not seen since the severe drought of the early 1990s.

"People will feel this," he said. "We really want to see if people are willing to conserve absent rationing."

A federal judge this summer issued a ruling that is expected to slash water deliveries from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta by about a third, part of an effort to save the endangered delta smelt.

As a result, the MWD will have to import costlier water through transfers from places such as the Central Valley, ultimately raising customer rates by roughly 10%. That's on top of rate hikes many water agencies had previously planned to make up for infrastructure costs and other expenses.

The MWD already has locked in rates with local water agencies through the end of next year. Though customers might not face rate hikes until 2009, it's also possible some agencies might consider increases more quickly -- potentially to encourage conservation.

"Rates are going to go up," Kightlinger said. "It used to be we only had to go to those expensive [sources] to replace water 25% to 30% of the time. Now we're doing that 70% of the time."

Despite such concerns, Southern California's water situation is still significantly less dire than it was during the last major drought, in 1990-91. The region has seen less than 4 inches of rain this year, and the Sierra snowpack -- a key barometer of water supply -- is down sharply.

But most of the major reservoirs that serve the Southland are full, and the MWD's overall water reserve is several times larger than it was during the last drought.

On Monday, agriculture officials were still assessing how farmers would deal with the cut in water supplies, coming on top of an already bone-dry year.

In Riverside County, which has a \$1.1-billion agricultural industry, officials said cutbacks could threaten farmers' ability to continue growing certain crops, notably some water-thirsty nursery stock. The county also produces table grapes, bell peppers and dates.

Officials from the local water districts will meet with growers next month in a workshop sponsored by the Riverside County Farm Bureau, said Executive Director Steve Pastor.

"They know it's coming," Pastor said. "We just want to get them together to talk about what to do."

Cities and other agencies in the region differ greatly in their reliance on the MWD's imported water.

Los Angeles will probably be less affected than some neighbors because the city's Department of Water and Power receives a large portion of its supply from the Owens Valley -- a source that has thus far been uninterrupted. Still, L.A. receives 34% of its water from the MWD.

But across Southern California, many cities receive anywhere from a third to two-thirds of their water from the MWD, with the proportion depending largely on local groundwater supplies.

Anaheim gets 31% of its water from the MWD, but San Diego relies on the district for 73%. Long Beach gets about 50% of its water from the agency, and Santa Monica 82%.

San Diego officials say that until the MWD proposes specific rate changes, they don't know what kind of rate increases they will implement. But the city is so dependent on imported water that officials said they are worried.

"We're very concerned," said Bill Harris, deputy press secretary for San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders. "For the foreseeable future, we're dependent on Metropolitan and what they do."

Harris said San Diego has been aggressively pushing conservation measures, including a "20-gallon challenge" in which residents are asked to conserve that much water a day.

On Monday, officials with the San Diego County Water Authority addressed the City Council about the city's water outlook.

Locally, Long Beach has taken the most radical action on water conservation. The city's water board has prohibited residents from watering their lawns during the day or more than three times a week. Residents cannot use water hoses to clean driveways, patios, sidewalks or other paved areas unless they use a pressurized broom device.

Long Beach restaurants are barred from serving water unless diners expressly request it.

"Let's not just sit around and pray for rain. Everyone has to get serious about conservation," said Kevin Wattier, general manager of the Long Beach Water District, adding that the agency expects to raise rates within the next year or so.

MWD officials said other factors could worsen the water crunch over the next few months.

Besides the tiny smelt, the fate of chinook salmon that migrate through the delta could soon lead to another court decision, which could further restrict supplies.

"The court has heard arguments about the salmon, and we're awaiting their ruling on it," Kightlinger said. "That could make the situation that much tougher to deal with."

The Metropolitan Water District has had to draw from stored reserves, which are meant to be tapped in the event of a natural disaster or other catastrophe. Unless something changes, those reserves could be expended within a few years.

"We're faced with the prospect that Metropolitan could deplete those reserves as quickly as three years if this critical drought condition continues and if nothing is done," said Debra Man, the MWD's chief operating officer and assistant general manager.

Timothy Quinn, executive director of the Assn. of California Water Agencies, said the anxiety he and others are feeling is comparable to that felt during the prolonged drought and water crisis of the early '90s.

"I remember the angst felt back during the last drought, especially in 1991. I remember it like yesterday," Quinn said. "I have the same sense of foreboding today."