

Headline: Ruling spurs 'great deal of uncertainty' over water supply

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Another dry winter coupled with a judge's ruling that will severely reduce water supplies coming to the Inland region could lead to mandatory conservation measures in some areas, officials said Wednesday.

But most agencies said they would drill new wells, possibly increase water rates to customers who use large amounts and take other steps before forcing residents to conserve.

U.S. District Judge Oliver W. Wanger sided late Friday with environmental groups who said the pumps in the Sacramento delta that bring the water south were killing a tiny endangered fish known as the Delta smelt. His order could reduce water supplies by up to one-third when the fish spawn beginning in December.

Metropolitan Water District, whose customers include suppliers in western Riverside County and southwestern San Bernardino County, said it will create an emergency plan by November for possible cutbacks to its member agencies. The Inland area gets about one-third of its water from the delta.

Board members "want to have that tool available in the event we don't see a very good winter and we find ourselves wanting to use it," said Roger Patterson, MWD's assistant general manager.

"The bottom line on this is that we moved into an area of tremendous uncertainty as to where we go from here," Patterson said. "It makes it hard for us to provide a reliable water supply to our customers."

John Rossi, general manager of Western Municipal Water District, said a cutback of 20 percent or more will spur the district that serves the western half of western Riverside County to look at some sort of mandatory conservation. He said it's likely to focus on outdoor watering, which can account for 60 percent of a home's water use.

Rossi said the district will first look at other options, such as buying water from cities like Riverside that have an abundant groundwater supply.

The San Geronio Pass Water Agency will focus initially on educating residents about the delta situation; officials at Perris-based Eastern Municipal Water District, which serves the eastern half of western Riverside County, said mandatory conservation is unlikely for their area; and agencies in the Coachella Valley don't get delta water directly.

'Crisis Is Indefinite'

Tim Quinn, president of the Association of California Water Agencies, said that while the judge's order will last a year, "the crisis is indefinite."

Randy Van Gelder, general manager of San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District, which imports delta water for several cities, said unlike a natural drought, this decision can have lasting impacts.

"We've had droughts that have lasted one or two or three years, the potential here, though, because you're dealing with saving an endangered species, this could become a permanent way of life, not just a temporary drought," said Van Gelder.

Officials in the Schwarzenegger administration said it will be left up to individual agencies to adopt conservation plans because the disruption in the delta affects communities differently, said Lester Snow, director of the state Department of Water Resources.

Snow and others urged lawmakers to act on Gov. Schwarzenegger's \$5.95 billion water plan, which includes \$1 billion for delta restoration and a new system to divert water around the environmentally sensitive area. The proposal has been blocked by Democrats who oppose the plan's call for additional reservoirs. Snow said a lasting solution is needed for the delta.

Wanger's ruling "introduces a great deal of uncertainty into the water supply," Snow said. "This won't be the last court case, it won't be the last disaster in the delta, unless we proceed in a very, very comprehensive fashion dealing with conservation, storage, conveyance, wastewater recycling -- the entire package."

A Dire Situation

Even before the ruling, the Inland region's major water sources were in bad shape. The Colorado River is gripped by an eight-year drought; the water content of the Sierra Nevada snow pack was at its lowest level since 1990; and snowfall in local mountains that feed aquifers was 30 percent of normal. Rainfall this past season in Riverside was 1.93 inches, making it the driest year since at least 1883. Typically, it averages 10 to 12 inches.

If the dire water situation persists, agencies might consider an increase in rates as an incentive to get people to conserve.

"You see a number of areas in Southern California where they're talking about adopting a rate structure that if you use more than a certain amount of water, you pay a penalty," Van Gelder said. "We're not looking at that yet."

Chris Diggs, water resources manager for Redlands, said likely options would be drilling new wells into groundwater or treating water from contaminated wells. Both are costly.

He said mandatory conservation most likely won't be adopted, but the City Council would be the body to consider the policy change, he said.

"As staffers, we're going to do everything we can to prevent taking that to the council," Diggs said.

Peter Gleick, president of the Oakland-based Pacific Institute, said water agencies ought to promote ways to use water more efficiently.

"We can always drill another well and build another reservoir. But that thinking is killing our rivers and draining our aquifers," he said.

Susan Lien Longville, director of the Water Resources Institute at Cal State San Bernardino, said Inland agencies have increased their water-conservation activities. But she said it's also hard to talk conservation to residents when they see large parks and other public places irrigating several acres of water-thirsty grass.

"We need to set a good example," she said. "I suspect you'll see that more."