

Headline: Multiyear shortage of water discussed

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Water managers warned yesterday that San Diego County is on the verge of multiyear shortages comparable to those caused by the early 1990s drought.

Fears about the fragile water supply grew after a court ruling Friday that is expected to dramatically reduce state water deliveries to Southern California.

Soaring temperatures added to the unease by spiking the demand for water. At the same time, the Colorado River – the county's other major source of water – remains shriveled by a long dry spell that is likely to worsen with climate changes related to global warming, scientists say.

While the full effect of the judge's order is uncertain, water officials are talking about raising prices to promote conservation and imposing urban water-use restrictions next year. North County farmers already were expecting cutbacks of at least 30 percent starting in January.

"We are in for a tremendous shift in the way we operate our agencies and access . . . water supplies for our customers," said Gary Arant, general manager for the Valley Center Municipal Water District.

The growing pessimism fueled speculation about water shortages hampering economic growth. During the last big drought, water officials learned that it is politically difficult to allow new connections as they force cutbacks for existing customers.

Friday's court ruling also prompted San Diego City Attorney Michael Aguirre to press the City Council and Mayor Jerry Sanders yesterday to boost water supply through recycling.

Aguirre said adding heavily treated wastewater to reservoirs could help the city meet water demands and avoid lawsuits over the adequacy of its aging sewage treatment plant in Point Loma.

Sanders has opposed such recycling, which supporters call "indirect potable reuse" and critics label as "toilet-to-tap." A city spokesman said the mayor had not reviewed Aguirre's proposal.

The order, made by U.S. District Court Judge Oliver Wanger, is aimed at protecting a tiny and endangered fish called the delta smelt, which lives in the Sacramento Delta. The fish are threatened by pumps that send water to 25 million Californians.

The precise amount of water required for smelt protection won't be known for months, and possibly longer if there is an appeal. Early estimates are that the safeguards would lower normal deliveries from 14 percent to 37 percent.

That kind of drop-off can hurt business investment, said Joseph Panetta, chief executive of the San Diego region's biotech industry alliance, BIOCOM.

"When you look at a company's decisions about expanding and creating commercial-scale operations, (water security) has an impact," Panetta said.

At the Building Industry Association in San Diego, chief executive Paul Tryon is bracing for another hit against home builders that will come if mandatory water reductions are enacted.

"I understand the emotional outfall and how it will affect our industry – whether there are adequate resources and should we . . . be permitting new homes and providing new water service," Tryon said.

He said he hopes residents will consider the larger picture: that new homes often are far more efficient than older ones and that homes built in any given year are just a fraction of all the existing homes countywide.

Long before Friday's ruling, water agencies countywide were trying to "drought-proof" their supplies by methods such as desalinating seawater and building emergency reservoirs. They also have pushed outdoor water conservation by asking residents to reduce use by 10 percent, or an estimated 20 gallons, a day.

Voluntary conservation measures likely will give way to mandates by 2009, said Mark Watton, general manager of the Otay Water District. In the past, that has meant restricting the days when people can water their yards.

"We are really in sort of a short-term crunch here over the next two to six years," Watton said.

To the extent that water district sales drop, so do their revenues. If reserves can't cover the costs, agencies would have to increase their prices.

Rates also may jump if retail water sellers, such as the city of San Diego, increase financial penalties to induce conservation among overusing customers.