

## **Attachment 4**

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### **Drought & Pumping Impacts Could Hit Valley's Eastside**

*Tulare County* - The drought that has punished the west side of the Valley this summer could spread to the east side this coming season if the combination of predictions of another dry year and adverse court rulings translates into a much reduced supply of water being sent south of the Delta. And, it could mean more pumping of groundwater.

That's the message from a number of eastside water agencies who are preparing for the worst while hoping for the best. They want to spread the word.

“The orange growers of Tulare County have to understand that we have a major stake in the health of the Delta,” says Dan Vink, general manager of the Lower Tule Irrigation District, a Friant contractor. “We are the first exporters out of the Delta” even though all of Friant water supply comes from the San Joaquin River – well south of the Delta.

Vink says other beneficiaries of Friant water, like the cities of Fresno, Lindsay and Orange Cove, are in the same boat. “There will be significant cost to fix the Delta and all of the users will have to step up to the plate.”

About half of Tulare County's overall delivered water supply doesn't come from this county's back yard rivers and nearby runoff. It comes from Fresno and Merced's back yard – the upper San Joaquin River – diverted at Friant Dam into the 150-mile Friant-Kern Canal.

It is that supply that greens up the Valley's eastside dominated by small farms and permanent plantings of citrus, grapes, nut trees and the world's largest dairy milk shed. Depending on weather, the feds bring in a million to 3 million acre feet a year into the Tulare Lake Basin. The state brings in around 1 million to 2 million acre feet depending on northern California weather.

Meanwhile, rivers like the Kaweah bring an average of 300,000 to 400,000 acre feet of water down the hill each year and the Tule's flow is much less than that. Kings River brings in a much larger flow. But add up the federal and state surface water that comes into the greater basin, it is typically more than half the water delivered. These numbers show – without delivery of surface water – we are in a world of hurt.

To give you an idea of how much Tulare County farms and communities depend on Friant canal water, consider that 15 of the member water districts in the 20 member Friant Water Authority group hail from Tulare County.

Meanwhile, in a dry year, we pump more water state water, figures show. In 2001– a dry year – the basin used nearly 7 million acre feet of groundwater in a year when less than 3 million acre feet of surface water was delivered. In a wet year, only 2.7 million acre feet was pumped from the ground.

Altogether, Friant delivers water to about a million acres of farmland on the Valley's eastside. Without it, much of the orange belt would simply be a dust bowl.

It was back in the late 1940s that irrigation pumps on the Valley's eastside went dry along the foothill citrus belt due to over pumping and falling water tables. That prompted the call for more imported water to help maintain and build a stronger farm based economy in the South Valley. The plan has clearly worked, creating the nation's richest ag region. But the plan was set up with a caveat.

Friant Water Users General Manager Ron Jacobsma explains that farmers who hold the water rights to San Joaquin River water in the Mendota/Los Banos area agreed back in the '50s not to exercise it as long as they got the same amount of water – about 800,000 acre feet a year from northern California shipped south of the Delta. These are the so-called “exchange contractors.” “For the past 50 years there was never a thought this arrangement would be a problem,” says Jacobsma. But today, two years of drought and very low water reservoir levels around the state has set the stage for a possible worst-case scenario. Add to that the regulatory drought – environmental lawsuits and a federal judge's potential rulings to further reduce pumping of water south of the Delta to protect the fish. Last December, the judge's ruling curtailed pumping of water by about 30 percent statewide, affecting residents all over California.

Now environmental problems and a decline in fisheries in the fragile Delta region exacerbated by two years of drought have set in motion a possible suspension to this agreement if supplies that were “exchanged” in the past aren't there.

To be clear, Jacobsma says he does not expect this scenario to play out but admits for the first time “it's a possibility.”

### **Lots of Pumping this Summer**

The Valley's Westside has seen the face of drought this year and it isn't pretty. Thousands of acres of crops were left to rot in the fields this summer after the Bureau of Reclamation cut water deliveries to the Westlands Water District. Westlands farmer Mark Borba says farmers tried to save their trees this summer by aggressive water pumping and a neighbor of his says his water table dropped 200 feet.

“We know this is not sustainable” says Borba. But with about 100,000 acres of permanent crops, trees and vines now planted in the district – farmers used every drop to save those trees and their crop when possible. The area's towns have seen a farm worker exodus as hundreds were laid off from formerly permanent positions this summer. Concerned about their water table, Westlands is doing a groundwater study to see how much was lifted out of aquifers this summer. The betting is a lot more than last year's 300,000 acre feet.

Now, predictions that the federal government can deliver from zero to just 10 percent of its water allocation next year are turning a bad situation in Westlands into a nightmare.

Borba says both Westlands and the exchange contractors are dependent on the San Luis Reservoir for their water supply – water that comes from the Delta that is pumped into storage near Los Banos. The carryover of water in this reservoir mirrors the situation in the upper part of the state. Supply in San Luis Reservoir is just 13 percent of capacity (30 percent of normal for this time of year) and Oroville to the north is expected to be at its lowest level in history. Helping to drive concerns that Friant water may be in jeopardy this coming year are rulings by Judge Oliver Wanger in the past year that cut water pumping south of the Delta to protect the endangered Delta smelt fishery. The judge's ruling last December cut water supplies by 30 percent this year.

This past week, environmentalists asked Judge Wanger to cancel existing water contracts because they don't reflect the dire straits of the smelt in the Delta. If Wanger agrees, that could mean less water coming first to Westlands and Friant that would be next in line if the supply dwindles more.

Wanger is set to rule on a second endangered fish species – the salmon that has been in a decline in the Delta and all over the West Coast as well. An adverse ruling to save this fish could potentially curtail more water moving south.

The water issue is important not just for Tulare County but the entire state that depends on the intricate web of water reservoirs and canals to deliver water from the wetter north to the more arid but populated southern part of the state. Further, California's share of Colorado River that buffeted the state during previous droughts has now been permanently curtailed as that region too suffers from persistent drought.

Without surface water delivered to Tulare County farms, the area's water table is likely to fall fast and furious.

Local walnut grower Tony Langiano says he is having to dig deeper to get his irrigation water. “The water level has dropped 23 percent in the past two years,” Langiano tells the Farm Bureau newspaper, dropping to over 121 feet when it was 52 feet in 1987.

Farmers won't hesitate to run their pumps if the supply isn't delivered by the ditch company. The trees won't wait for an explanation. And our area's water level could plunge fast like in Westlands if everyone is pumping water from the underground pool of water.

Local reservoirs like Lake Success and Lake Kaweah will get replenished, but right now they are at just 7 percent of capacity – basically a puddle of water maintained to keep the fish alive. But even as they fill up with a new supply – the volume can't touch the supply of imported water coming into the basin along with state water that comes into the Tulare Lake area as well as the federal supply. Now, both the federal and state supply is in jeopardy because each faces the same restrictions on moving water south of the Delta.

That's why farmers and farm workers were up in Sacramento this past summer lobbying hard for a comprehensive water bond that would help fix the Delta as well as add new water storage on the upper San Joaquin River. This was the fourth time in recent memory that legislators failed to come up with a water bond compromise. The latest effort again failed to generate an agreement that could have been on this November's ballot.

### **Water Bond/Recirculation Issue**

Friant and other water agencies point out the bond is needed to store and move water – not just for business, farms and drinking water for all Californians – they need these new facilities to store and move water for fish and wildlife. A larger San Joaquin River reservoir will mean that we can store big winter rains to replenish the groundwater later, rather than let hundreds of thousands of acre feet head out to sea because the reservoir is too small to handle it. Friant's Jacobsma confirms the idea that it will likely ask its members and others who depend on the Delta to contribute to the cost of fixing it. “We are asking the state and federal government to participate” and we want a seat at the table too. That will require money.

Besides the loss of some water in dry years to the exchange contractors, Friant, as a requirement of the river settlement process, wants to “recirculate” water it sends down the river to restore the river habitat and to help salmon and bring that water back to the district. That could mean 200,000 acre feet of water annually that it needs to recover, says Jacobsma. Friant's firm supply is just about 800,000 acre feet. If the Delta is not fixed, there will be no way to recirculate that water. The settlement agreement is set to go into effect in 2009.

Jacobsma says in the long run, the Valley and the state need an isolated peripheral canal to move water south around the Delta without harming the fish.

Others believe farmers can save far more water than they do today and suggest putting money into a new Sierra dam doesn't make sense but restoring historic Tulare Lake for groundwater storage does. But moving water by gravity from the Sierra to the eastside orchards has some logic to it while it isn't clear how you move water from a big groundwater bank around Corcoran. Instead, eastside districts have invested in groundwater banks closer to where the water is put to use.

Source: Valley Voice, September 2008