



DROUGHT: Colorado River saves Inland farmers

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The drought is expected to cost the state \$2.7 billion in agriculture losses this year, but farmers in eastern Riverside County are faring well because of steady supplies from the Colorado River, according to the authors of a new economic forecast.

The worst effects are hitting farmers in the Central Valley, who have been forced to draw from groundwater basins. They are paying more to pump deeper and drill new wells, threatening to overdraw underground reserves that may be needed during future water shortages.

Those are the conclusions of a study released this week by the Center for Watershed Sciences at UC Davis. Drought-related farm impacts are expected to be 30 percent worse than last year, said lead author Richard Howitt, professor emeritus of agricultural and resource economics at the university.

“Things have gotten really dry now,” he said.

In the fourth year of drought, the agriculture industry is expected to lose 21,000 jobs, including seasonal farm workers, truck drivers and food processors. An estimated 542,000 acres have been fallowed.

But it’s a different story in the Coachella Valley, which has some of the most productive farms in the nation. The valley generated \$730 million in agriculture revenue last year, up 9 percent from the year before.

More than two-thirds of the 66,000 acres of farmland there is irrigated with Colorado River water delivered via the Coachella Canal, a branch of the All-American Canal, according to the Coachella Valley Water District.

“It’s such a different situation down here than in the Central Valley,” said Blaine Carian, co-owner of Desert Fresh, which grows dates, citrus and table grapes on 750 acres between Indio and Thermal. “It’s a totally different delivery system.”

Central Valley farmers rely on rivers supplied by snow melt, which was a fraction of normal this year. Water rights for thousands of farmers were curtailed by the state earlier this year, forcing some to stop irrigating and others to turn to well water.

In the Coachella Valley, less than 20 percent of farmers use wells and that percentage is dropping, Carian said.

“The water district here has been working very hard to get people off groundwater and save that aquifer for other uses,” Carian said.

Colorado River deliveries to the Coachella Valley Water District are secure through 2017, based on water levels at lakes in the upper reaches of the river basin, he said.

Ken Melban, a vice president at the California Avocado Commission in Irvine, said his industry also is doing well, despite the drought.

Southwest Riverside County is one of the five primary avocado growing regions in the state, with almost 6,000 acres planted, according to the commission.

“There are definitely individual growers who are facing challenges because of the drought, but overall, farmers are finding a way to maintain and cope. Next season, we don’t see any drought-related supply problems in fruit,” he said.

According to the UC Davis study, farmers in Southern California and the Central Coast may end up benefiting from slightly higher commodity prices due to decreased production in other parts of the state.

In other findings:

- Surface water shortages of nearly 8.7 million acre-feet will be mostly offset by increased groundwater pumping of 6 million acre-feet, primarily in the Central Valley. The offsets have helped keep the industry profitable this year.
- The amount of fallowed land increased by 114,000 acres since last year. Most fallowed land is in the Tulare Basin.
- The effects of continued drought through 2017, based on continued 2015 water supplies, may be 6 percent worse than 2015. Gradual loss of groundwater pumping capacity and water elevations will add to the incremental costs of a prolonged drought.
- Increased groundwater overdraft during drought will slowly deplete groundwater reserves at an incremental cost. New groundwater regulations could eventually reverse this trend.

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