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Ag water providers must have drought plan

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Gov. Jerry Brown boosted reporting requirements for agricultural water users April 1 while his administration deflected criticism that farmers were mostly spared from his latest measures to help California withstand the drought.

Amid a wide-reaching executive order, Brown told state water regulators to require more frequent reporting of water diversions and use by water right holders, conduct inspections and crack down further on illegal diversions and wasteful use of water.

Agricultural water providers serving more than 10,000 acres are required to develop drought management plans that detail how the districts "strike a balance between supplies and demand," said Mark Cowin, director of the state Department of Water Resources.

Additionally, local water agencies in high- and medium-risk groundwater basins must immediately implement a groundwater monitoring program.

"It's obvious that we're clearly in a drought that we've not seen before, and neither have our parents or grandparents, so we have to take measures we haven't taken before," State Water Resources Control Board chairwoman Felicia Marcus said in a conference call with reporters.

The ag-related measures come amid instructions from Brown that mostly center around urban water use, including a mandate that cities reduce their consumption by 25 percent compared to 2013 levels and that state and local agencies replace 50 million square feet of lawns with drought-tolerant landscapes.

"Last year the governor asked all Californians to reduce their water use by 20 percent, but unfortunately many haven't stepped up to meet that goal," said Mark Ghilarducci, director of California's Office of Emergency Services. "Now with no snow in the mountains and with reservoirs getting lower by the day, it's really time to do more."

Marcus and other officials deflected criticism that Brown isn't requiring farmers to do more to conserve. For instance, Restore the Delta executive director Barbara Barrigan-Parilla asserted in a statement that Brown places "the largest burden of conservation on urban water users" while refusing to deal with "the insatiable demands of big agribusiness growers on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley."

Courtesy of Calif. Dept. of Water Resources

California Gov. Jerry Brown, right, watches as Department of Water Resources snow surveys chief Frank Gehrke conducts a manual snow survey April 1 at Phillips Station east of Sacramento. The state's third manual snow survey of the season found virtually no snow.

State officials noted the farmers' water supplies have already been drastically cut back, as many growers will get no federal water, only 20 percent of their normal supplies of state water or face curtailment notices if they have a junior water right.

"Everyone knows that the drought is especially a hard hit for agriculture," said state Food and Agriculture secretary Karen Ross, adding that growers fallowed more than 400,000 acres last year and the drought caused the loss of 17,000 ag-related jobs.

Water shortages will cause growers to take out more trees and vines this year, she said.

"It's farm and wage income that's not going to be spent in these rural communities," she said.

Agricultural water suppliers that cover more than 25,000 acres have been required since 2009 to submit water management plans to the state. Brown's order adds a mandate for a detailed drought plan and applies the rules to smaller water districts, too.

Plans must include details of how much water was used in 2013, 2014 and 2015 and describe actions the water district is taking to manage demand during the drought. The state will provide technical assistance and funding, prioritizing grants to smaller districts, according to the order.

Other details of how the order will be implemented will be worked out in the coming weeks by the water board and Department of Water Resources.

Brown issued the order as he accompanied Cowin and snow surveys chief Frank Gehrke on the third manual snow survey of the season near Echo Summit 90 miles east of Sacramento, where they found no snow on the ground for the first time in the test site's 75-year history.

California's snowpack typically supplies about 30 percent of the state's water needs as it melts in the spring and summer, but statewide electronic readings April 1 found only 1.4 inches of water content, or 5 percent of the historical average of 28.3 inches for the date, the DWR reported.

Sticky cotton prevention tips offered

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

DAVIS, Calif. — Researcher Peter Goodell compares cases of sticky cotton to buying a child some cotton candy at a fair.

Pretty soon, he said, a sticky residue is all over the child's clothes, the back seat of the car and everything the little boy or girl touches, he said.

The same mess is created by sticky cotton, which is caused by invasions of whiteflies that secrete honeydew on open cotton bolls.

"Sticky cotton affects spinning mills," Goodell said recently in a webinar for growers. "With a sticky deposit, they'll start to collect more and more loose cotton … This is the kind of issue that will shut the system down."

Frequent observations and tests in fields, taking advantage of natural enemies and knowing when to apply pesticides are keys to controlling whitefly invasions, explained Goodell, a University of California Cooperative Extension integrated pest management adviser based in Parlier, Calif.

The sweet potato whitefly was first found in the San Joaquin Valley in 1992, according to a UC news release. Growers have controlled the pest reasonably well since then, but the pest's invasions have become more of a problem in the last several years.

One potential reason may be heat. Generational turnover of whiteflies happens quickly, and in warm years such as the ones California has seen during the drought, the turnover is more rapid.

Whiteflies can directly damage plants by extracting proteins from plant sap, then the sticky sugars they leave behind can be a boon to fungi, Goodell said. An outbreak of sticky cotton can shut a mill down for a week, and the reputation hit from producing contaminated cotton can take years for an area to overcome, he said.

"Producing high-quality cotton in California requires that they be free of contaminants," he said.

Goodell advises that growers defoliate as quickly as possible to control insects and that they manage water and nitrogen to avoid excess late-season growth. Growers should sample leaves early in the season to determine if an invasion has occurred, and use selective insecticides in the early phase of an invasion to preserve natural enemies.

To know how best to treat for the pest as the season goes along, Goodell encourages growers to consult a worksheet developed by extension advisers. The worksheet can be found at http://ucanr.edu/blogs/Green/blogfiles/28455.pdf.

Senior water right holder usage suspended

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — The state warns that more stop-diversion orders loom for water right holders throughout California — and this time it may curtail some senior rights.

The State Water Resources Control Board sent warning letters to some 36,000 landowners and other entities that their rights to take water from rivers and streams will soon be suspended in key watersheds because of the drought.

The warnings are the agency's second this year and are designed to give water right holders advance notice to help them make difficult planting decisions this spring, officials said.

"We're monitoring the water in the streams, the availability of water and the expected demand," water board spokesman Tim Moran told the Capital Press.

"We don't know how many or if" senior right holders will be told to stop diverting, he said. "We're just giving them a warning that this could happen. It really depends on how much water is in the watershed and what we see is the projected demand."

The letters portend a repeat of last year, when curtailments impacted more than 5,000 water rights, according to the board. While the curtailments predominantly affect agriculture, they also apply to water rights held by municipalities and other water users, officials noted in a news release.

If dry conditions continue through the spring, curtailments are likely in certain watersheds on all post-1914 water rights, and many holders of pre-1914 rights could also be affected. If senior right holders are curtailed, officials would "work backwards by date," Moran said.

"If we get through all the juniors and there's still not enough water in the system, it would likely kick over to seniors," he said.

The warnings come as Gov. Jerry Brown issued a mandate last week that cities reduce their water consumption by 25 percent compared to 2013 levels and that state and local agencies replace 50 million square feet of lawns with drought-tolerant landscapes.

The governor's wide-reaching executive order largely spared agriculture, although Brown did boost various reporting requirements for agricultural water users. For instance, the governor told state water regulators to require more frequent reporting of water diversions and use by water right holders, conduct inspections and crack down further on illegal diversions and wasteful use of water.

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