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## California

# Water agency's land purchase rattles California farmers

By ELLIOT SPAGAT and JAE HONG  
Associated Press

BLYTHE, Calif. (AP) — The nation's largest distributor of treated drinking water became the largest landowner in a remote California farming region for good reason: The alfalfa-growing area is first in line to get Colorado River water.

Metropolitan Water District of Southern California's play in Palo Verde Valley, along the Arizona line, tapped a deep distrust between farm and city that pervades the West over a river that's a lifeline for seven states and northern Mexico.

Farmers recall how Los Angeles' modern founders built an aqueduct a century ago to bring water hundreds of miles from rural Owens Valley, a story that was fictionally portrayed in Roman Polanski's 1974 film, "Chinatown."

"Are we going to dry up our rural, agricultural communities just to keep Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego growing? I think it would be a sad state of affairs," said Bart Fisher, a melon and broccoli farmer who is board president of the Palo Verde Irrigation District.

Metropolitan tried to calm nerves by sending its chairman in September to a public forum in Blythe, 225 miles east of its Los Angeles headquarters. It pledged to honor a 2004 agreement that caps the amount of land it pays farmers to idle at 28 percent of the valley.

That agreement, which expires in 2040, is hailed as a model for farms and cities to cooperate. Metropolitan pays farmers about as much as they would profit to harvest — \$771 an acre this year — to bring foregone Colorado River water on its 242-mile aqueduct to 19 million people in the coastal megalopolis it serves.

Palo Verde enjoys California's highest rights to the river, making them immune to



AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

In this Nov. 13 photo, Bart Fisher, farmer and president of the Palo Verde Irrigation District, looks at the Colorado River while pausing for photos in Blythe, Calif. The third-generation farmer who was born in Blythe left 29 percent of his farmland fallow this year. The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the nation's largest distributor of treated drinking water, became the largest landowner in the region including Blythe for good reason: The alfalfa-growing area sits at the top of the legal pecking order to Colorado River water, a lifeline for seven Western states and northern Mexico.

drought.

The dynamic changed when Metropolitan paid \$256 million in July to nearly double its Palo Verde holdings to 29,000 acres, or about 30 percent of the valley. The agency denied its purchase from Verbena LLC, a company that bought the land several years earlier from the Mormon church, was part of an orchestrated plan.

"It's made the farmers out there nervous that we are the largest owner but there was a strategic opportunity that came up," Metropolitan's general manager Jeffrey Kightlinger said.

Metropolitan stirred similar angst this month in Northern California when its board expressed interest in buying farms on several islands in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Its staff said the land could provide water storage and wildlife habitat.

Blythe, a riverside town

of about 13,000 people in the Mojave Desert with two state prisons, is an oasis of gas stations, motels and fast-food restaurants on Interstate 10 between Los Angeles and Phoenix. Thomas Blythe staked claim to the river in 1877, beating Southern California cities under a Gold Rush-era doctrine called "first in time, first in right."

Los Angeles and its suburbs founded Metropolitan in 1928 to build the remarkably durable Colorado River Aqueduct. Parker Dam and the reservoir it created in Lake Havasu empties into a gray Art Deco-style building with nine pumps that quietly pipe water 300 feet up a steep slope. Teal metal cases that cover the pumps vibrate so little that a nickel placed on top stands on its side.

The water goes uphill through four more pump stations and through tunnels, canals and pipelines before reaching Southern California's

coastal plain two days later.

The Colorado's huge man-made reservoirs have made the river an unheralded savior in California's four-year drought. Last year, the river supplied two-thirds of the 1.7 billion gallons of drinking water that Metropolitan delivers daily, up from a third three years earlier.

The river sustains 40 million people and farms 5½ million acres, but white "bathtub rings" lining walls of the nation's largest reservoir in Lake Mead, near Las Vegas, are evidence of shrinking supplies. California took more than it was entitled to until Sunbelt cities like Phoenix and Las Vegas clamored for their share and forced the nation's most populous state to go on a diet in 2003.

"It's really the only supply of water to this otherwise bone-dry region," said Bill Hasencamp, Metropolitan's manager of Colorado River resources.

## Q&A: A look at the Colorado River and its role in the West

By ELLIOT SPAGAT  
Associated Press

Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the nation's largest drinking water distributor, bought nearly 13,000 acres of remote farms in July for \$256 million, rattling farmers but giving it prized rights to the Colorado River.

compact, raising the possibility of cuts. The Colorado has been in drought for 15 years. This year, Lake Mead dropped close to levels that would trigger cuts until rain staved off a day of reckoning.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation estimates that the shortfall will grow to 3.2 million acre-feet by 2060.

### WHY IS THE COLORADO RIVER SO IMPORTANT?

The river, which travels 1,400 miles from Colorado to northern Mexico, is the main source of water for an extremely dry region. In 1922, Upper Basin states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming agreed to split deliveries with Lower Basin states of Arizona, California and Nevada. A 1944 treaty gave a fixed amount of water to Mexico.

The Colorado's reservoirs — including the nation's largest, Lake Mead, at Hoover Dam — can store 60 million acre-feet of water, allowing wet years to position the region for drought. (An acre-foot is enough to supply two typical households for a year.)

### WHAT'S THE OUTLOOK?

States overestimated how much water the river would deliver in the 1922

### WHAT ABOUT CALIFORNIA?

As the nation's most populous state, California has sparred repeatedly with its neighbors, particularly Arizona, which prevailed in a 1963 U.S. Supreme Court decision over how to divide the water. Arizona later built a 336-mile aqueduct system to bring river water from Lake Havasu to central and southern parts of the state. The growth of Sunbelt cities like Phoenix forced California to stop using more than its share and go on a water diet in 2003.

California cut its use of the river partly by having farms sell water to cities, bringing water from Lake Havasu to Lake Matthews in Riverside County on Metropolitan's 242-mile aqueduct. The Imperial Irrigation District, located in the state's southeast corner, sells water to San Diego in the nation's largest farm-to-city water sale. Metropolitan buys water from Palo Verde Valley.

## California focuses on power lines as top cause of wildfires

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER  
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — California lawmakers focused last week on power lines as a cause of devastating wildfires, possibly including a blaze this summer that killed two people and damaged or destroyed 965 structures in the Sierra Nevada foothills.

Pacific Gas & Electric Co., the state's largest utility, said in September that a power line rubbing against a tree may have started the blaze that burned 70,000 acres and caused \$52 million in damage, becoming the seventh-most destructive in

state history.

California fire officials have yet to announce their conclusions on the cause.

It was the second-most devastating fire in a drought year that so far has seen more than 6,000 wildfires, about one-third more than the recent average, David Shew, a fire-prevention planner at the state's forestry and fire protection department, told a state Senate subcommittee Wednesday.

Electrical equipment — including power lines that brush against trees or hit the ground — typically rival only trash fires as the chief cause of wildfires in California, said state Sen. Jerry

Hill, D-San Mateo, the head of a state Senate subcommittee overseeing the safety of utilities.

He convened the hearing to scrutinize what the state's utilities and utility regulators were doing to lessen the risk.

Hill, long a critic of PG&E and the California Public Utilities Commission on safety issues, focused attention on PG&E.

"I really would like to find a way to trust PG&E again," said Hill, whose district includes the San Francisco Bay Area city of San Bruno, where a PG&E gas-line explosion in 2010 killed eight people and triggered years of examination of state regulators' oversight of utilities.

## Owners of fire-damaged land urged to guard against soil erosion

By TIM HEARDEN  
Capital Press

LAKEPORT, Calif. — Timber, livestock and wine producers with fire-scarred lands near here are safeguarding against soil erosion, and some are counting their blessings that the damage wasn't worse, a farm adviser says.

As the University of California Cooperative Extension is encouraging fire-affected landowners to leave some tree remnants and even debris in place to prevent too much rain-caused runoff, timber producers are planning salvage logging operations for the spring, UCCE farm adviser Greg Giusti said.

"What we're telling them as well as other people is to make sure culverts are clear before the rain, and after rains to check culverts," Giusti said. "We're telling folks to look at their road conditions, as roads are a primary source of sediment."

Extension officials want to prevent too much soil and ash



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

A hot saw salvages logs in a burned-out forest near Shingletown, Calif., in 2013. A University of California Cooperative Extension adviser says forested areas that had been grazed had a much better survival rate after this year's wildfires.

from clogging streams, which could cause flooding when El Nino-powered winter rains come. Giusti has advised landowners to consider using hay bales as debris traps in front of culverts that are still functional, he said.

Together, the Valley Fire, Jerusalem Fire and Rocky Fire burned nearly 200,000 acres of timberland and rolling hills northeast of the San Francis-

co Bay area this summer. The fires burned 1,329 homes, 27 multi-family residences and 66 commercial properties, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

For some agricultural producers, however, the damage could have been worse.

For one thing, on forest lands that had been grazed, the fires went through with much less intensity because of the lack of fuel loads than in areas with lots of underbrush, Giusti said.

"Even though (the grazed areas) are heavily forested, the trees are still standing," he said. "There's still a tremendous amount of cover on rangelands that I've seen ... I don't see any obvious difference."

Though they were singed by the fires, Giusti still expects grazing lands to be green by spring, he said.

Meanwhile, most of the area's vineyards are on relatively flat ground and the vineyards weren't obliterated, Giusti said. Some vineyards suffered heat damage or lost five or six rows of vines, but the entire vineyard wasn't lost, he said.

"Most vineyard owners up here in Northern California are on a winter erosion schedule anyway," Giusti said. "They're using cover crops or trap crops to minimize the off-site movement of soil for their properties. Whether they were burned or not, they're going to do what they always do."

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