

California's Water Project boosts allocations

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — With the state's reservoirs filling rapidly amid recent storms, the State Water Project now predicts it will deliver at least 15 percent of requested supplies to its 29 contractors.

The state Department of Water Resources announced it expects to deliver 631,115 acre-feet of the nearly 4.2 million acre-feet requested by local agencies, up from the 10

percent of normal deliveries initially allocated in December.

DWR director Mark Cowin said in a statement that the allocation is still low despite all the rain and snow because the drought isn't over.

"Our modest increase underscores the fact that we still have a critical water shortage that we don't know when will end," he said. "One look at our low reservoirs tells us that we need a lot more wet weather before summer."

As of Jan. 25, Lake Oroville — the State Water Project's main reservoir — was at 39 percent of capacity and 60 percent of average for this time of year, according to the DWR's California Data Exchange Center.

However, with 10,212 cubic feet per second flowing into the lake, the surface is rising. It was at 714.19 feet above sea level on Jan. 25, up from its low point of 649.5 feet above sea level on Dec. 9, according to the DWR.

State and federal officials have said California would need 150 percent of normal levels of rain and snow this winter to significantly ease drought conditions. California's snow water content statewide was 115 percent of normal as of Jan. 26, the data center reported.

Nonetheless, the state water allocation could be increased further if storms continue to build rainfall and snowpack totals, officials said. Last winter's allocation

started at 10 percent and was eventually raised to 20 percent.

Last year's allocation was the state's second lowest since 1991, when agricultural customers got a zero allocation and municipal customers received 30 percent of requests. In 2014, SWP deliveries were 5 percent for all customers. Contractors haven't received their full allocations since 2006.

After a break this week, more rain and snow is expect-

ed in California this weekend, according to the National Weather Service. Above-average precipitation is anticipated for Northern California over the next two weeks, with El Niño still expected to produce above-average rainfall for the entire state over the next three months, the federal Climate Prediction Center reports.

The State Water Project serves about 25 million California farmers and just under 1 million acres of irrigated farmland, according to the DWR.

Cancellation of grass-fed standard worries farm group

USDA's marketing division drops labeling program

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

The USDA's marketing division has dropped its standards for grass-fed meat, which the agency says won't impact ranchers or consumers but has a sustainable farming group worried.



AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite, File

In this file photo, steaks and other beef products are displayed for sale at a grocery store in McLean, Va. The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service is dropping its "grass-fed" label program, but the Food Safety Inspection Service is now handling it.

The agency's Agricultural Marketing Service recently withdrew its voluntary standards for livestock producers who want to market their livestock's meat as grass-fed, which the AMS had verified through an annual audit program since 2007.

After a routine review, AMS decided the verification program doesn't fit within its "statutory mandate" because the division doesn't actually regulate food labels, which fall under the purview of the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service.

While AMS does not have the authority to define its own labeling standards for "grass-fed" meat, the division can still verify ranchers are following their own grass-fed production standards or those developed by other programs, the agency said.

Labeling claims must ultimately be approved by FSIS, which reviews documentation from producers to establish they don't feed their livestock grain and provide continuous access to pasture during the growing season, said Sam Jones-Elard, public affairs specialist for AMS.

"It is a house-cleaning exercise more than anything else," he said in an email.

The agency's explanation isn't particularly reassuring for the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, which supports grass-fed meat production and is concerned about the rationale for the change.

"It is a different system and will bear careful watching," said Ferd Hoefner, the coalition's policy director.

Hoefner said he worries the revocation of AMS grass-fed labeling standards was actually motivated by pressure from large meat companies that want to use the claim without following the protocols.

"They'd prefer not to live up to the standard," he said.

The reason that AMS created its grass-fed standards was due to the lack of a common definition in the livestock industry, Hoefner said.

The division will resurrect its previous system of verifying producer "grass-fed" claims that don't adhere to a common understanding of the term, he said.

"They're going back to a multiplicity of meanings, rather than a single meaning," Hoefner said. "It helps the consumer not one iota."

Although the FSIS will check documentation to ensure grass-fed labels are not misleading, Hoefner is concerned that its process won't be as thorough.

Auditors from AMS conducted yearly on-site reviews, while the FSIS approves a label based on documentation only once instead of routinely, he said.

Die-offs fluster beekeepers on eve of almond blossom

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

PALO CEDRO, Calif. — As almond blossom in California is about to begin, beekeepers have endured another tough winter in terms of honey bee die-offs, producers and researchers say.

A variety of factors are being blamed, including signs that the varroa mite believed to cause many of the deaths is developing a resistance to treatments against it, University of California-Davis bee expert Elina Nino said.

While there's been no organized survey to discover how widespread the losses have been this year, some beekeepers have reported significant losses, and some deaths occurred even before the winter began, she said.

"They've been having issues keeping bees alive for most of the year," said Nino, an extension apiculturist at the UC's Harry H. Laidlaw Jr. Honey Bee Research Facility. "Especially they've had a lot of issues with the varroa mite, maybe more than before. They've had to treat more often. ... It doesn't sound great."

Bee breeder Glenda Wooten, co-owner of Wooten's Golden Queens in Palo Cedro, said the operation lost a small percentage of bees this winter but she knows of other beekeepers who suffered deeper losses. She, too, blamed much of the carnage on varroa mites, a virus-transmitting parasite of honey bees.



Courtesy of Kathy Keatley Garvey/UC-Davis

Retired University of California-Davis bee breeder and geneticist Kim Fondrk prepares bees to be deployed in an almond orchard in Dixon, Calif. As the almond blossom is about to begin, beekeepers have had another rough winter in terms of die-offs.

"It's getting that our treatments don't work on the varroa mite as much as they used to," Wooten said. "Then when they go back and the hives are dead, they say, 'What happened? I treated.'"

"But it took a lot of food this summer to keep them going" as the drought limited forage for bees, she said. "We had to supplement feed with sugar syrup a lot this summer."

The shortage of forage after last year's almond blossom prompted some bee suppliers across the country to decide

to pass on this year's bloom, Wooten said.

"A lot of guys aren't going to come back to California," she said. "Once they came out here, their hives didn't do well the rest of the summer for them."

The tighter supply of bees and California's ever-expanding bearing acreage of almonds — it was 870,000 in 2014, according to the USDA — has pushed growers' pollination costs to roughly \$200 a hive, Wooten said. That's up from about \$150 per hive three

seasons ago.

To trim transportation costs, some beekeepers in Florida are shipping bees one-way to California and leaving it up to almond growers to dispose of them when they're finished. Growers have had no trouble finding beekeepers in California to purchase them, Wooten said.

"I know several beekeepers who want to buy those hives," Wooten said. "They're a very good product ... I'll bet if you tried to buy some now you'd find out they're already sold."

Federal judge rejects glyphosate labeling lawsuit

Monsanto was accused of misleading claims about herbicide

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

A federal judge has thrown out a lawsuit that accused Monsanto of labeling its "Roundup" glyphosate herbicide to mislead people about health impacts.

Last year, several Los Angeles residents filed a lawsuit alleging that the biotech and pesticide company falsely claimed the weed-killing chemical "targets an enzyme

found in plants but not in people or pets."

The lawsuit sought class action status that would allow other Roundup buyers to join the litigation, as well as financial compensation for damages and an injunction prohibiting Monsanto from advertising that Roundup doesn't affect people or animals.

According to the plaintiffs, glyphosate disrupts an enzyme known as EPSP synthase, which affects not only plants but also microbes, including those found in the digestive systems of people and animals.

Their complaint contended that glyphosate kills gut bacteria just as it does weeds, which

harms "digestion, metabolism, and vital immune system functions" when people eat crops sprayed with the chemical.

Monsanto responded that the allegation was an "absurd misinterpretation" of its claim because the enzyme is not produced by human or animal cells and the labels make no mention of "gut bacteria."

The company also said the plaintiff's accusations about glyphosate's use in commercial food production are irrelevant to consumers applying the chemical to weeds in their lawn or garden.

U.S. District Judge Dean Pregerson has agreed with Monsanto's request to dismiss

the lawsuit, ruling that its labeling claims were approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and thus the complaint is pre-empted by federal regulation.

The Federal Insecticide Fungicide and Rodenticide Act, or FIFRA, aims in part to create uniformity in labeling and packaging for pesticides, so lawsuits that seek to alter such claims based on state false advertising laws are barred, Pregerson said.

T. Matthew Phillips, the attorney representing the plaintiffs, said he plans to appeal.

"The judge never determined whether the label statement is true or false," he said. "Apparently the truth doesn't matter to the courts nor Monsanto."

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