California facing 4th year of drought?

Last Update: 8/13 9:08 pm

What will happen to California if we have another drought year next year? That was the question on the minds of many Thursday in Sacramento and no one likes the answers they heard.

Water, it's the lifeblood of the West, but nature and the courts have wrapped a tourniquet around the flow of water to some 20-million Californians and hundreds of farms.

And if California's three-year-drought extends into a fourth year?

"Looking at the lakes and reservoirs, we're not doing to good right now. All we can do is pray for a wet winter," said Jim Smith, who is worried about drought.

"We don't have a crystal ball. That's why we need a contingency plan," said Kamar Vuivetchi with the State Water Resources Department.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar says solving California's water crisis is a national priority. Congressional hearings aimed at fixing the Sacramento Delta are set for next month.

"I think it's very encouraging. The Sacramento Delta is an important water supply aspect for Kern County," said Florn Core, Director of Bakersfield Water Resources.

Water watchdogs in Kern County are worried that congressional hearings will only lead to more studies.

"We need facilities, not processes. We continue to draw down on local resources. We can't afford more studies," said Jim Beck, General Manager Kern County Water Agency.

We've had three straight years of drought and, to protect endangered fish species, a federal judge has ordered drastic restrictions on water exports to farms and cities south of the delta.

To offset that, demand has increased for more groundwater. Groundwater levels in Kern County have dropped by some 60-feet in just the last year.

Pumping costs for growers and water retailers are going up. "And those costs will be passed along to the consumer," added Beck.

"We can't keep pumping at these tremendous rates forever. So we may get to the point sometime down the road where we'll be asking consumers to cut back," added Core.

Drastically reduced water deliveries to the San Joaquin valley have hit Kern County hard. Water experts say 20,000 farm jobs have been lost. 80,000 acres of farm land has been fallowed or under-irrigated and there has been $300-million in lost crop revenue.

Another year of drought will only make matters worse for thousands of farmers and farm workers who work in the San Joaquin Valley and help feed the world.

One thing that could greatly alleviate drought conditions is El Nino. State Meteorologists say El Niño ocean conditions are strengthening.

They expect at least a moderate event this winter and possibly a strong event, which means rainfall levels could increase dramatically this winter.

But even if El Nino doesn't materialize, local water watchers say it's not likely that we will see mandatory water rationing in Bakersfield in 2010.