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Water usage overestimated

Districts note excess rations

Keith Matheny
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Two of California's largest Colorado River water-users, the Imperial Irrigation District and Coachella Valley Water District, expect to leave large amounts of their river water allotments unused this year.

The surprising projection comes as drought continues in the parched western United States and communities continue to scramble to conserve water and find new supplies.

The projected leftover river water would be the largest amounts for the agencies since the 2003 Quantitative Settlement Agreement, or QSA, forced river-users to keep better track of their water use.

It's good news for the water-starved Los Angeles area, as agreements call for the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California and its 19million customers to receive all unused agricultural water supplies from IID and the Coachella Valley Water District.

Metropolitan customers are currently in mandatory water conservation programs enacted this year for the first time in 18 years.

The influx of water from the Coachella and Imperial valleys “would help replenish our storage in case next year is dry as well,” agency general manager Jeff Kightlinger said.

The Colorado River's water is apportioned to states along the river through a 1931 agreement. California gets 4.4 million acre-feet of the 7.5 million acre-feet divided among southern river states.

California's share in turn is split among six agencies, with IID by far the largest recipient of river water supplies at 3.1 million acre-feet annually. The Coachella Valley Water District is entitled to 330,000 acre-feet per year.

One acre-foot provides a typical Coachella Valley home with enough water for a year.

The Coachella Valley district plans to finish the year below its annual Colorado River allotment by up to 8,000 acre-feet of water. IID projects to finish the year 180,000 acre-feet below its allotment. The estimates come from the federal Bureau of Reclamation that manages the river.

“This is the farthest off our order that we've been since the QSA and since we really started watching,” said Coachella Valley Water District general manager Steve Robbins.

The QSA came about after California's neighbors, needing increased supplies for themselves, complained about the Golden State routinely using far more river water than that to which it was entitled.

The pact required California to scale back its river water use from 5.1 million acre feet annually around 2000 to the current 4.4 million acre-feet a year.

Until the QSA, not much attention was paid to whether states or agencies were over- or under-using river water, Robbins said.

“Nobody really cared if we were over before then,” he said.

“Those days are gone.”

Conservation controversy

Why IID and Coachella Valley Water District have river water to spare is a point of debate.

IID spokesman Kevin Kelley said it's a result of the depressed farming economy, particularly for forage crops such as alfalfa that is fed to cattle.

“It's a function of natural market forces,” he said. “If farm commodity prices were high, those fields would be planted and water would be ordered for them.”

But Tom Brundy, owner of Brundy Farms in Calexico, said a major contributing factor is the efforts farmers have put into conserving water.

Brundy said he now uses computer programs feeding information on the moisture content of soil, laser guided sloping of fields to provide just the right irrigation levels, and additional staff to better manage water.

“The conservation we're doing today, we're doing out of our own pocket, and we're pretty much maxed out,” Brundy said.

But the water that farmers are saving is benefiting urban areas. Meanwhile, crop revenues are dropping and farming costs increasing, Brundy said.

“The QSA is supposed to provide funds for on-farm conservation,” he said. “I haven't seen a dime.”

More should be done to pay back farmers for conservation efforts that free up water for urban areas that need it, Brundy said.

“If I don't get compensated, I'm going to quit,” he said. “There's no money out here. I am losing money today on my farm, and more than a little bit.”

In the Coachella Valley, crops are not as varied and rotated, and the high-end grape, citrus and date fields face less economic pressure than in Imperial County, Robbins said.

The reduced river water use in the Coachella Valley district this year is likely because of a summer that was mild by the desert's standards, he said.

“We had a really cool June,” he said. “Even when it got hot, we didn't have those 120-degree days, or a lot of days of 115 in a row.

“That means you don't have as much water evaporating off the fields and the plants don't need as much.”