

## Agriculture by Marcia Merry

### California hit by new water cuts

*Federal action to cut water for agriculture in the Central Valley Project marks a new phase of ecological breakdown.*

**O**n February 15, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation officials in California cut water supplies from its giant Central Valley Project to record low levels, turning off all water to some farmers and drastically reducing the amounts available to others. The CVP normally supplies around one-third of the water used for agriculture in California—which, in turn, provides well over half of many of the fruits and vegetables in the country.

The CVP will deliver just 2 million acre-feet of water this year—only 27% of the 7.35 million acre-feet it has distributed in years of normal rainfall, said Don Paff, CVP chief of operations. “We just don’t have enough to go around,” Paff told a news conference.

The CVP has 3.35 million acre-feet of water stored in its five reservoirs, compared with a capacity of 11.4 million acre-feet. An acre-foot is equal to 325,851 gallons.

Last year the CVP made 4 million acre-feet available, but now the flow will be down to a trickle. These drastic cuts and rationing come as a result of five years of drought, but also as the direct consequence of 20-plus years of lack of repair and expansion of large-scale water improvements needed to guarantee water for the arid western states.

The key projects on the drawing boards of the 1960s were never undertaken—in particular, the North American Water and Power Alliance (NAWAPA). This project would have diverted flows from the MacKenzie River Basin, now going unused into the Arctic Ocean, southward through central Canada and central United

States, augmenting other basins.

In addition, nuclear power desalination plants have not been constructed, which could make use of the Pacific Ocean as an endless reservoir of potential sweet water. The latest stall comes from a decision by the Metropolitan Water District of southern California—one of the biggest in the world—to cancel plans for a modular high-temperature gas-cooled reactor, proposed by General Atomics.

Therefore, as the California ground water was overpumped, the Colorado River basin water overused, and no additional water supplied, various user groups are put in competition. Federal engineers will send CVP water into the Sacramento River for the Chinook salmon run, and also designate water for non-farm residential use south of the Central Valley, while water for agriculture is cut. Urban water users and wildlife refuges each will receive about 50% of their normal supplies, down from 75-80% last year, while water is cut completely to thousands of farms.

To make matters worse, anti-economic growth forces have succeeded in placing a ban on utilizing the flow of certain northern California river runoff, now coursing unused into the Pacific, in the name of the “environment.”

In fact, the *lack* of water project development is causing ecological degradation to man, animal, rock, and tree—and fish.

The famous dust storm which blinded drivers on the main Central Valley highway last December, causing many deaths, was the result of de-

nial of water to farmers, whose fields were not planted.

The Central Valley Project, California’s largest water distribution system, will provide no water this year to agricultural water districts with low seniority. Last year, these districts received 25% of their normal supply.

The cutoff will stop deliveries to roughly half of the 23,000 farmers who rely on the project for most of their water, said Roger Patterson, regional director for the CVP.

“That’s going to make 1992 perhaps the worst year we’ve ever seen out there,” said Shelly Vuicich, spokesman for the Westlands Water District in Fresno, which serves nearly 700 farmers on a 70-mile strip of land adjoining Interstate 5.

Some farmers will be forced to depend on well water pumped from diminishing underground supplies, and others will try to purchase water on the open market, Vuicich said. Many farmers will reduce the acreage they plant and switch to crops that use less water, and others may quit farming altogether. “About one-third of our farmers don’t have ground water wells, so for them, they are looking at a disastrous situation,” she added.

Certain farmers in the Sacramento and San Joaquin River basins who are “water-rights holders” with senior contracts, stand to receive water deliveries from the CVP of up to 50% and 75%, respectively. Each was guaranteed 75% of normal deliveries last year.

California’s gross sales of farm products declined by \$1 billion last year to \$17.9 billion, largely because of the drought, as well as the devastating whitefly infestation and winter freeze. California’s second largest water distribution system, the State Water Project, has also announced big cuts. It will provide users only 20% of normal deliveries.