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California suffering drought conditions; ag land expected to be fallowed

By

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As it approaches the summer with no rain in the forecast, California is experiencing its second dry year in a row, which has resulted in the declaration of a drought emergency and fears that next year will be worse. The fallowing of farmland this summer and next year appears to be an inevitability.

Jeanine Jones, interstate resources manager for the California Department of Water Resources, said the hydrological conditions are such that only a very wet 2022 water year (Oct. 1, 2021-Sept. 30, 2022) could alleviate the situation. California faced similar conditions during its last drought, 2012-2016, when the state's farmers had to fallow 500,000 acres because of lack of water.



Jones noted that water year 2020 was the 13th driest year in California's recorded history with water year 2021 headed for a top 10 finish and perhaps even one of five driest years in the state's history.

Exacerbating the problem is warmer average temperatures and the fact that since the turn of the

century, 10 of the 20 years have been classified as dry or drought. This has led to almost chronic hydrological conditions featuring below average storage levels in the state's reservoirs, low moisture in the soil, and depleted ground water tables.

For generations, California farmers would utilize ground water, accessed through wells, when surface water fell below average. Consequently, during the six-year drought running from 1987 to 1992 – one of the longest since 1900, only a total of 175,000 acres were fallowed. In additions, the hydrology conditions were not as severe, Jones said.

The drought of 2012-16 led to the state passing the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), mandating that groundwater tables be managed and establishing rules and regulations to do so. California was one of only a handful of Western states that did not have a groundwater management program. Jones said that in the long run this act will become part of the solution as it will not allow the groundwater tables to be depleted as they were going into the last drought, and as they still are today.

Because of this year's drought conditions, farmers on the West side of the San Joaquin Valley with senior water rights (a complicated century-old system) have received a water allocation representing only 5 percent of their contracted rates. Growers with more junior water rights have already seen the proverbial floodgates closed. Many growers in other parts of the valley have received slightly higher allocations but still well below what they need in most instances.

Many California farmers grow both row crops and permanent crops so in times like this they tend to fallow the land devoted to row crops and divert the water to their permanent crops.

Jones' dire forecast for water allocations next year is based on the fact that the soil is already dry and run-off from the snow melt is largely completed. The reservoirs, with many being less than half full, are not going to be getting much more water and there will be a further net loss going into the fall when the next water year begins. The early rain will most likely produce little run-off as it will be used by nature to restore the dry soil. "Even if we get average rainfall next year, we won't get an average amount of run-off," she said, which is why it is necessary for the state to experience a very wet year if nature is to rectify the situation.

Jones said historical records indicate that the increase in dry and drought years is a trend rather than a historical anomaly. She said the ratio of wet years to dry years continues to fall and average temperature has increased. Experts say when California's Sustainable Groundwater Act is fully implemented it will require an annual fallowing of about half a million acres to reach the decades-long goals established by the program.

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