

Feds boost drought funding by \$50 mil.

By Fenit Nirappil, AP

SACRAMENTO – The federal government is making available up to \$50 million in drought-relief funds for western states, with the largest portion earmarked for parched California, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell and Gov. Jerry Brown announced Friday.

The additional funding includes about \$20 million for the Central Valley Water Project for efforts such as water transfers, drought monitoring for endangered species and diversifying water supplies. California is entering its fourth year of drought.

“California is ground zero for the drought. There is no state that is worse off,” Jewell said.

Farmers and local water departments can also compete for another \$14 million for projects to help reduce water use and develop response plans to continuing drought conditions.

The funding announcement came as the first major storm of 2015 moved into Northern California, bringing with it the potential for up to 10 inches of rain in places. It arrived after an exceptionally dry January. Last week’s survey of water in the snowpack, California’s primary water source, found only a quarter of its normal level

The Department of Interior funding is a sliver of previous drought-relief commitments. Last February, President Obama pledged \$183 million, mostly for farmers who lost livestock and food banks to help unemployed agriculture workers. Brown in March signed a \$687 million drought-relief package, including for emergency drinking water and accelerating

infrastructure supplies.

Efforts to pass a federal drought-response bill in Congress failed late last year. House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy and other Republicans say the Obama administration's approach to dry conditions continues to prioritize fish over farmers and other residents in California.

The State Water Resources Control Board announced this week that Californians cut monthly water use by 22 percent in December, meeting Brown's call to slash residential water use by 20 percent for the first time. The board may impose further limits on outdoor water use as the state tries to protect supplies, but Brown said he's not ready for mandatory restrictions statewide.

"I'm reluctant to expand the coercive power of state authority," Brown said. "In a democracy, it is fundamental that citizens be the driving force. It's my job to encourage and inspire and monitor, but before we have, you know, full-scale rationing we have to have a few more problems than we currently have."

California is only delivering 15 percent of the water requested from the state's vast reservoir system to farmers and local agencies this year. The Interior Department will announce how much water it will send to Central Valley farmers under a separate reservoir system later this month.