

Calif. water districts challenge state's drought order

By Associated Press

FRESNO – Three California irrigation districts sued the state on Friday, claiming officials overstepped their authority by ordering farmers with some of the strongest water rights to stop pumping from some rivers during the drought.

The legal challenges came from three districts that provide water to farmers in the San Joaquin River watershed – prime California farmland that relies on the river to produce a significant portion of the nation's fruits, nuts and vegetables.

The districts allege the state Water Resources Control Board threatened them with financial ruin and violated their rights last week when it sent orders to 114 water users that hold senior water rights dating back to 1914 and earlier.

“This is our water,” Oakdale Irrigation District general manager Steve Knell said in a statement. “We firmly believe in that fact and we are willing to take on the state bureaucracy to protect that right.”

Peter Rietkerk of the Patterson Irrigation District said the walnut and almond orchards of growers could wither and die, costing them half-a-billion dollars.

George Kostyrko, a spokesman for the state Water Resources Control Board, declined to comment, saying the agency will respond in court.

California is enduring its driest four-year period in recorded history. The water board action marked the first time since a

1977 drought that California has directed a significant number of senior water rights holders to stop pumping.

The South San Joaquin Irrigation District in Manteca and Patterson Irrigation District also filed lawsuits. The Banta-Carbona Irrigation District in Tracy filed a day earlier.

“I can only think they do not understand the devastation their actions will cause in our district and in the local economy,” Rietkerk said of state officials.