

Calif. farmers brace for water shortage despite El Niño

By Scott Smith, AP

FRESNO – Farmers in the fertile San Joaquin Valley are bracing to receive no irrigation water from a federal system of reservoirs and canals for a third consecutive year and looking to El Niño to produce the very wet winter they need.

The year kicked off with heavy rains and an above-average snowpack in the Sierra Nevada. The El Niño – a global weather system associated with wet winters in California – may play out nationwide through late spring or beyond, officials at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration say.

While many are celebrating a break to the long dry spell, however, the four driest years on record for California have left their mark, and experts say it will take time for the parched state to recover.

“We need a wet winter this winter and next and the following winter probably to get us anywhere close to equilibrium,” said Dave Kranz, a spokesman for the California Farm Bureau Federation.

State water managers say California’s snowpack needs to be at 150 percent of normal on April 1 to signal an end to drought. Friday it was at 110 percent, according to the Department of Water Resources’ statewide electronic reading.

Lake Shasta, the state’s largest reservoir, remains at half of its historical average for this time of year. Other major reservoirs in Oroville and Folsom that collect and store rain and snowmelt had reached or came close to historical low

levels before the winter storms hit.

The lack of surface water supplies for irrigation during the drought has forced many farmers to use groundwater to keep their crops alive, drawing down wells and leading many to run dry.

Westlands Water District, which relies on water from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, has warned hundreds of farms it serves in the San Joaquin Valley that they may not be receiving any irrigation water yet again this year, said district spokeswoman Gayle Holman.

Westlands is the nation's largest supplier of irrigation water, and for the last two years, the bureau's initial allocation was for zero percent of the district's contracted amount. It remained at zero throughout both years.

Holman said that this stormy winter has raised hope that in the spring they'll receive some federal water, even if officials at first announce that there's none available. Holman said that by that time it may be too late.

"The need for that water is now," she said, adding that any federal water sent to them early in the year would be stored in reservoirs for use when the weather warms and the growing seasons begins. "That's why the timing is so critical."

Federal officials say it is too early now to know how much water will be available. California's wet season is just underway. The bureau is monitoring the snowpack, rainfall, reservoir levels and other factors before saying how much water it will release to farmers and other users.

That announcement typically comes in late February, said bureau spokesman Louis Moore.

The Water Resources Department, which also manages part of California's vast water system, said in early December that it

anticipated releasing 10 percent of expected supplies this year – half of the last year's allocation.

The state's figure could also change, depending on the amount of precipitation that falls in the next several months, officials said.

San Joaquin Valley farmer Shawn Coburn, who grows 1,500 acres of almonds, pistachios and tomatoes along the San Joaquin River near Firebaugh, said the rain has become an exciting event.

On a recent stormy night, Coburn was up at 3am watching satellite images of clouds moving over California. He exchanged text messages with another farmer on the other side of the valley, alerting each other when raindrops started falling.

But Coburn relies in part on federal water supplies, and he said officials have repeatedly warned farmers like him that they should expect no irrigation water. He may leave his tomato fields unplanted this year, saving his limited water to keep his trees alive.

"We may never recover," said Coburn, who also blames environmental regulations designed to protect endangered fish for depriving farmers of water. "This may be the long death spiral."

Lester Snow, executive director of the California Water Foundation, said the drought has exposed a weakness in the state's water management system built 60 or more years ago.

The amount of land farmers now cultivate and the number of people living in the state have both dramatically increased since state and federal officials built California's massive water system.

Yet Snow said the state hasn't adequately invested in

modernizing it, such as finding ways to capture storm water runoff, recycle water, store and recharge depleted groundwater.

“We’re not going back to the good old days,” said Snow, a former secretary of the California Natural Resources Agency. “We’ve reached a new normal in volatility, and we need to adapt to that.”