



Westlands Water District

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WESTLANDS' FOOD FOR THOUGHT

THE WEEKLY REPORT ON CALIFORNIA'S BROKEN WATER SYSTEM

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Why did the nation's most productive farm region receive only 65% of their contracted water this year?



It's complicated. However, listening to the federal government you would think that the partial allocation was an aberration, not something that has become an all-too-familiar result.

This year with California's water systems bursting at the seams, south-of-Delta communities received only a 65% initial water allocation. The federal government correctly explained that the allocation announcement of 65% was due, in part, to the presence of "carryover water" in San Luis Reservoir. Indeed, but for the presence of that rescheduled water, the initial allocation for south-of-Delta Central Valley Project (CVP) agricultural water service contractors could have been 80 – 85%. However, the implication that the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and other laws restricting operations of the CVP have not impacted water allocations is misleading at best.

Here's what you should know about carryover water:

First, the federal agencies failed to explain that the practice of carrying over water from one year to the next only exists because of years of restrictive operations of the CVP due to the implementation of the Endangered Species Act and other laws and regulations. As an insurance policy against low allocations, farmers purchase water or save the prior year's allocation for carryover in San Luis Reservoir. In years like 2014, 2015, and 2016, if farmers had not engaged in this practice, they would have had no surface water for their operations in those years. Moreover, the Bureau of Reclamation failed to mention that carryover water in San Luis Reservoir in 2014, 2015, and 2016 was used by Reclamation to meet its obligations to other water districts and refuges. Had that rescheduled water not been present in the Reservoir and available to Reclamation for other project purposes, Reclamation would not have been able to meet many of its obligations. Focusing on how carryover water affected a single year's allocation tells only a small part of the story.

Second, it is correct that because of the extremely wet hydrology, the ESA and other regulations have not restricted CVP operations in 2017. But after 2014, 2015, and 2016, when allocations were 0%, 0%, and 5% respectively, it would be disingenuous to assert those regulations did not affect water supply. In those prior years, the hole dug in water supply by application of the ESA is so deep it will take multiple years to recover. Each year, there seems to be a new explanation for the CVP's failure to deliver contracted water. But it's clear now, more than ever, the real problem is the laws and operations of the CVP.

Last, the agriculture community is sometimes accused of oversimplifying these complex water issues. But this year, the federal government oversimplified the reason for denying a full allocation and rather than acknowledging the broken system, they pointed to a problem they helped create.

It's time for honesty in the very worthwhile debate about how YOUR water is being prioritized.