



REUTERS

Despite rain, California still fighting over water



Fri, Feb 12 2010

By Dan Whitcomb

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - California has been deluged with rain and snow this winter, but its epic tug-of-war over water rages on, this time in the form of a plan by U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein to divert more water to the state's farmers.

Feinstein has infuriated environmental activists, fishing groups and even fellow California Democrats by drafting federal legislation that would ease Endangered Species Act restrictions to allow more water to be pumped out of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta for growers in the state's Central Valley.

Drastic cutbacks in irrigation supplies this year alone from both state and federal water projects have idled about 23,000 farm workers and 300,000 acres of cropland, according to University of California at Davis researchers.

"The unemployment rate is 40 percent in some valley towns and people are standing in bread lines," Feinstein said in a statement released through her office.

"I believe we need a fair compromise that will respect the Endangered Species Act while recognizing the fact that people in California's breadbasket face complete economic ruin without help," she added.

California is the No. 1 farm state in the United States and its Central Valley is one of the country's most important agricultural regions. California farmers produce more than half the fruit, vegetables and nuts grown in the United States.

The senator has not released details of her proposed measure, which may be attached as an amendment to a federal jobs bill. But she said it would grant farmers in the state's agricultural heartland up to 40 percent of their federal water allocation for two years.

Irrigation districts contract with the state and federal governments to deliver a certain amount of water to them each year. But shortages have recently kept them from getting their full allotments. Most farmers got just 10 percent of their contracted allocation in 2009 and could get less this year.

The cutbacks were forced by water shortages stemming from a three-year statewide drought and delta pumping restrictions imposed to protect imperiled salmon and smelt populations.

A string of Pacific storms this winter has dumped several feet of snow on the mountain ranges that feed California's major reservoirs, but officials have stopped short of declaring an official end to the drought.

'SCREW THE COAST'

Fishing groups say draining the delta is the main reason for a crash in salmon populations that may force closure of the state's commercial salmon fishery for a third straight year, and that Feinstein's plan would worsen the situation.

"She's basically saying, 'I'm going to go ahead and give these big water guys ... the water and screw the coast,'" said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations.

Grader said the collapse of the salmon fishery has put 23,000 people out of work and cost \$1 billion in the commercial and recreational fishing industries of California and Oregon.

Meanwhile environmental groups warn that the bill could destabilize California's long-term water supply by damaging the delta's fragile ecosystem.

Even some fellow members of California's U.S. congressional delegation were annoyed with Feinstein, saying she had agreed with them to wait for a report by the National Academy of Sciences, which provides advice on scientific issues to U.S. policymakers, before drawing up any water policy changes.

"We had a couple meetings on this, and at the last meeting she had indicated that we would base any policy decisions we make on the science," U.S. Representative Mike Thompson told Reuters. "And this policy change certainly isn't based on science."

The state supplies more than 25 million people and over 750,000 acres of farmland with water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, fed by rainfall and snow-melt runoff from the Sierra Nevada mountains.

That water is delivered to cities and irrigation districts throughout California by a sprawling network of reservoirs, pipelines, aqueducts and pumping stations known as the State Water Project. A separate system run by the U.S. government is the main irrigation source for Central Valley farms.

(Additional reporting by Steve Gorman; Editing by Will Dunham)