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Calif. water worries reach new level

State users warned about river reliance

By Larry Gerber
The Associated Press

PALM SPRINGS, Calif. — Kindly but clearly, a federal regulator laid down the law to California water dealers. The president of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce told them they had better pass it on to customers, especially in the desert south.

In blunt terms, the message was: Get ready to pay up or dry up.

It's not a message most Californians, north or south, seem to want to hear. In the last election, residents of one little Mojave Desert water district even used a 2-year-old enabling initiative, Proposition 218, to vote themselves free of most water fees.

But with the state's population expected to increase from 32 million to 47.5 million by 2020, just about everybody in the water business — and the business of business — wants to wean Southern California from its long reliance on the Colorado River.

"As long as people can turn on the tap and receive water, they will not support bond issues, they will not support tax increases," said Eze Burts of the Los Angeles chamber.

Speaking at the fall conference of the Association of California Water Agencies, Burts told about driving his kids 600 miles into the Sierra Nevada to show them how far their bathwater has to travel.

He said the water dealers should get more public in their public relations.

An answer pushed by businessmen and the federal government is the CalFed Bay-Delta Program, a partnership of 14 state and federal agencies begun in 1995 to come up with a water plan for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and San Francisco Bay.

Many conservationists worry that the plan, expected to be released soon, amounts to a multibillion-dollar wave of dam construction, creating reservoirs and



Associated Press / Denis Poroy

Todd Edmondson fishes next to a water-control lock on the All-American Canal near Calxico, Calif. The canal carries Colorado River water to the vegetable fields of the Imperial Valley.

threatening endangered species.

The Bay-Delta system, 400 miles north of Los Angeles and its urban sprawl, is home to 750 species of wildlife and plants, state environmental officials say.

It is also the irrigation hub for California's trillion-dollar agricultural economy and source of water for two-thirds of Californians. The rest comes from underground or from the Colorado River.

In Southern California, it might help to turn off the lawn sprinklers, real estate expert Henry Madrid said.

"To succeed we have to set aside our individual interests," Madrid said.

That also was a message from Robert Johnson, regional director of the Bureau of Reclamation and administrator of the lower Colorado River.

Six other states and Mexico

share the river. For two years, California has been on notice to start living within its allocation of 4.4 million acre-feet of water a year. An acre-foot is enough for one or two families a year.

The state still is using up to 5.3 million acre-feet, said David Kennedy, director of the state's Department of Water Resources.

That's all right as long as there is an official "surplus" of water in the river, Johnson said. When the Colorado goes down, so will California's share, he said.

There probably will be a surplus declared for 1999, but California had better have a plan in place in case drought hits again, as it did in 1991 and 1992, Johnson said.

California agencies are working on it, Kennedy said.

Eighty-five percent of the state's Colorado water rights are held by farm irrigation districts on the riv-

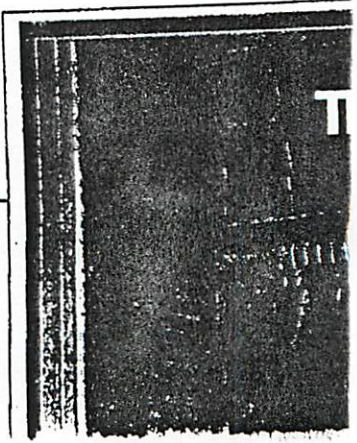
er. California's problem is how to turn what is legally farm water into tap water for more people, Kennedy said.

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, head of the Bay-Delta effort painted a dire picture of what could happen if California wasn't ready:

"We'll just stagger along and everyone continues to quarrel there'll be an ecological crisis in the Delta, fish runs crash toward extinction, and at some point the Endangered Species Act comes in to play . . . and you just start shutting down water users," he said.

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