

# Drought-ridden California faces decision on new water cuts

May 22 2015, by Ellen Knickmeyer And Scott Smith

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In this photo taken Monday, May 18, 2015, Gino Celli inspects wheat nearing harvest on his farm near Stockton, Calif. Celli, who farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

Farmers along the river delta at the heart of California agriculture expected to get an answer Friday on their surprise offer to give up a quarter of their water this year in exchange for being spared deeper mandatory cutbacks as California responds to the worsening drought.

Regulators with the state Water Resources Control Board promised a decision on the proposal by a group of farmers along the delta of the Sacramento-San Joaquin rivers—a rare concession by holders of some of California's strongest [water](#) rights.

For the first time since a 1977 drought, California regulators are warning of coming curtailments for such senior water-rights holders whose claims date back a century or more.

Earlier in the current drought, the state mandated 25 percent conservation by cities and towns and curtailed water deliveries to many farmers and communities with less solid claims to water.

The most arid winter on record for the Sierra Nevada snowpack means there will be little runoff this summer to feed California's rivers, reservoirs and irrigation canals. As of Thursday, the U.S. Drought Monitor rated 94 percent of California in severe drought or worse.

About 350 farmers turned out Thursday at a farmers' grange near Stockton to talk over the delta farmers' bid to stave off deeper cuts.



In this photo taken Monday, May 18, 2015, Gino Celli checks the moisture of land just planted with corn seed on land he farms near Stockton, Calif. Celli farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

"That doesn't necessarily mean they'll all participate" in the proposed voluntary cutbacks, said Michael George, the state's water master for the delta. Based on the farmers' comments, George said, he believed many will.

If the deal offered by farmers goes forward, delta farmers would have until June 1 to lay out how they will use 25 percent less water during what typically is a rain-free four months until September.

The delta is the heart of the water system in California, with miles of rivers interlacing fecund farmland. Its water is critical to wildlife and farmers in the country's most productive agriculture state.

Agriculture experts, however, say they would expect only modest immediate effects on food prices from any reduction in water to the senior water-rights holders. Other regions will be able to make up the difference if California moves away from low-profit crops, economists say.

State officials initially said they would also announce the first cuts of the four-year drought to senior rights holders on Friday. Water regulators said Thursday, however, that the announcement involving farmers and others in the watershed of the San Joaquin River would be delayed until at least next week.



In this photo taken Monday, May 18, 2015, Gino Celli checks the moisture of the ground next to a newly planted corn seed on land he farms near Stockton, Calif. Celli who farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

It is unclear whether the delta farmers' offer would go far enough to save drying, warming waterways statewide.

Farmers use 80 percent of all water taken from the land in California. Senior water-rights holders alone consume trillions of gallons of water a year. The state doesn't know exactly how much they use because of unreliable data collection.



In this photo taken Monday, May 18, 2015, Gino Celli inspects some recently sprouted corn on land he farms near Stockton, Calif. Celli farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his

irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

The 1977 cutback order for senior rights holders applied only to dozens of people along a stretch of the Sacramento River.

Although thousands of junior water rights holders have had their water curtailed this year, Gov. Jerry Brown has come under criticism for sparing [farmers](#) with senior water rights from the mandatory cutbacks. Increasing amounts of the state's irrigation water goes to specialty crops such as almonds, whose growers are expanding production despite the drought.



In this photo taken Monday, May 18, 2015, Gino Celli inspects wheat nearing harvest on his farm near Stockton, Calif. Celli, who farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)



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In this May 18, 2015 photo, Gino Celli draws a water sample to check the salinity in an irrigation canal that runs through his fields near Stockton, Calif. Celli farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)





In this May 18 2015 photo, Gino Celli uses a meter to check the salinity in an irrigation canal that runs through his fields near Stockton, Calif. Celli farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)



In this photo taken Monday, May 18, 2015, Gino Celli inspects a field of alfalfa hay, on his farm near Stockton, Calif. Celli, who farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)



In this photo taken Monday, May 18, 2015, Gino Celli inspects a field of alfalfa hay, on the land he farms near Stockton, Calif. Celli, who farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)



In this photo taken Monday, May 18, 2015, water slowly flows down a irrigation ditch on a field farmed by Gino Celli near Stockton, Calif. Celli, who farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)



In this photo taken Monday, May 18, 2015, farmer Gino Celli crosses an irrigation canal that is covered in dried salt on a field he farms near Stockton, Calif. Celli, who farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)



In this photo taken Monday, May 18, 2015, farmer Gino Celli climbs out of a irrigation canal that is covered in dried salt on a field he farms near Stockton, Calif. Celli, who farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)



In this photo taken Monday, May 18, 2015, irrigation pipes sit along a dried irrigation canal on a field farmed by Gino Celli near Stockton, Calif. Celli, who farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)



In this photo taken Monday, May 18, 2015, farmer Gino Celli checks salt from irrigation water that has dried on the land he farms near Stockton, Calif. Celli, who farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws his irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)





In this photo taken Monday, May 18, 2015, a tractor tills the dry land on the acreage farmed by Gino Celli, near Stockton, Calif. Celli, who farms 1,500 acres of land and manages another 7,000 acres, has senior water rights and draws irrigation water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta who have California's oldest water rights are proposing to voluntarily cut their use by 25 percent to avoid the possibility of even harsher restrictions by the state later this summer as the record drought continues. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

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