

California district agrees to clean up contaminated water

September 15 2015, by Scott Smith

The nation's largest irrigation district agreed to clean up contaminated water in California's fertile Central Valley in a tentative deal announced Tuesday, settling a decades-old dispute with the federal government.

Westlands Water District will clean up water tainted by salt that has accumulated in soil from years of irrigation, general manager Thomas Birmingham said. Federal officials have failed for more than half a century to do the work that the district will undertake, he said.

The Department of the Interior estimated the cleanup to cost \$3.5 billion, based on a project the government had proposed several years ago but never completed.

Westlands, however, did not say how much it would spend on the cleanup, but district officials said they agreed to fix the problem, whatever it takes. Birmingham said Westlands can do it for less.

Critics say the district and the U.S. Department of Interior secretly forged the agreement that wipes away large amounts of the district's debt and potentially gives it greater access to the state's scarce water supplies amid a record drought.

Responding to critics, Birmingham said negotiations were done in private but were not secret.

"They feel the need to attack anything that benefits Westlands,"

Birmingham said. "Westlands, by doing this, is undertaking significant risks and obligations that we currently don't have."

The tentative deal requires final approval by Congress.

The district supplies irrigation water to 700 family farms that grow everything from almonds to tomatoes on land in the San Joaquin Valley stretching from Firebaugh and Kettleman City. The district makes up a large part of Central California farming, which leads the nation in producing fruits, vegetables and nuts.

The settlement also relieves Westlands of \$350 million owed to taxpayers for its part in building the Central Valley Project, the system of canals that delivers water to providers as far south as San Diego.

It grants Westlands an indefinite water contract, rather than one that has to be renewed every two years. Farmers within the district also will no longer have to limit their farms to 960 acres.

Those terms worry U.S. Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Calif., who urged federal officials for more transparency in the settlement. McNerney represents residents along the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, a major source of Westlands' water.

He and other members of Congress were briefed Friday on the settlement.

"It's a sweetheart deal," McNerney said. "There's a lot of concern about what's in the agreement."

The Department of Interior also said it had briefed members of Congress.

McNerney, who expects that Congress will approve the deal, said he is not assured that Westlands will fulfill its obligation to clean up the contaminated water.

U.S. Rep. John Garamendi, a California Democrat who also was briefed, said the details they were presented are old. The settlement affects California's farming industry and the details of the negotiations are too important to be hidden from view, he said.

"The Department of Interior should be whacked badly for the secrecy in this agreement," Garamendi said.

The water district agreed to retire at least 20 percent of the 614,000 acres of farmland included in the district, which will limit the amount of federal water it can receive. In the last two years of drought, the district has received no federal water.

Federal officials will withhold water supplies from the district unless Westlands upholds its end of the bargain, Birmingham said. Critics say the deal gives the district priority over other customers that receive federal water, which Birmingham denies.

"That's the biggest hammer the government could have to ensure Westlands fulfills the obligation," he said.

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