

Federal Agencies and State of California Drought Media Briefing

Michael Connor: Thanks to everybody for being here today. I wanted to come out to California to demonstrate the commitment that we have at the federal level of working together to address the very serious situation that we have ongoing with the drought here. David set the context for some of the hydrology. I would just note we are tracking below 1977 to be the dryness year at this point in time. We're tracking substantially below it, and for further context, California's population was, I think, 22 million in 1977.

We're at 38 million now, so we have a more significant drought with a lot more people to serve. Yesterday, I came out, and we visited Folsom Dam. I met with some of the MNI contractors we have up there from Folsom, the San Juan Water District, and Roseville. We talked about a lot of the issues that they're facing. It's incredibly complex.

We're working very closely, not just amongst ourselves and the federal agencies and the state but also with our contractors to trying to get as much clarity in the situation as possible. That's really what I wanted to talk about a little bit more and describe actions that we're taking right now that will provide water immediately during this drought-stricken year, decisions we can make now that provide some clarity and certainty as we move forward over the next couple of months, which is helpful for the water community in California.

Also we want to make it clear that we want to continue invest in good water management efficiency projects, conservation efforts, to build a long-term drought resiliency here in California. I want to touch on all of those items. Once again, I just also want to thank also the representatives from the many federal agencies, and the State Department of Water Resources for being here, demonstrating a united front. I look forward to hearing from all of my colleagues on the things and actions that they're undertaking.

The framework which we're working in on the federal level is the National Drought Resilience Partnership. This is a Partnership amongst the federal agencies that calls for a resilient climate action plan. It allows us to try and link all the tools we have at the federal level, starting with weather information, forecasting information, getting the available information out so people can understand the implications of the drought and plan for it.

We need that information to help plan drought resiliency efforts and also to have a frame of information for long-term investments and building an ongoing mechanism for us to better address water needs in the near future. The National Drought Resilience Partnership is a nation-wide effort. I can tell you right now all of its energy is focused on California at this point in time. This is ground central for this partnership to demonstrate how we can bring focused efforts to California.

One of the announcements I wanted to make today was the finalization of Reclamation's 2014 Central Valley Project Water Plan. We've been doing a water plan over the last several years, since we had the three-year drought, 2008 and 2009, into 2010. We wanted to continue to clarify the actions that we can take to improve operations, to help facilitate the movement of water

among the partners, to work closely more identified with the California Department of Water Resources.

But, based on last year's situation, where the things dried up after the turn of the New Year in 2013, it was clear as we embarked on the summer months that we were in the middle of the drought. At that point in time, Regional Director David Murillo convened a lot of stakeholders with different interest in CVP water flows, started discussing new actions that we could take. We released the draft water plan in the fall of last year.

We're finalizing that plan today. We obviously want to continue on with having maximum flexibility in our operations and improvements. In those operations to yield additional water supplies, we want to streamline the process for water transfers within the state. We want to continue to invest in conservation opportunities, and we want to work closely with the state, not just the Department of Water Resources, but the State Water Resources Control Board. There's a lot of actions identified in that plan that we're finalizing today.

I would just note, a lot of those actions are premised on some role of hydrology and precipitation that allows at least modest water supply operations. Right now we're down, given the water supply situation, to be focused on health and public health and safety needs. A lot of the value of these actions that are described in the Water Operations Plan will depend on the hydrology.

But, it's good to make those decisions right now and it's good to provide that clarity so that, when the drought does begin to break a little bit, and we get to some level of water operations, we're not left trying to make those decisions on the fly. We think this fits into the idea of providing some operational certainty. A couple of the things I just want to mention specifically about the Water Operations Plan, within the plan we describe our rescheduling guidelines.

The fact that we are moving forward, as we informed our contractors last week, honoring the new scheduling guidelines that facilitated conservation action deferred deliveries last year, so that those water contractors south of the Delta and San Luis Reservoir, as well as Millerton Lake will have that water available that they created through their own actions. That's identified in the CVP Water Plan. We talked a little bit about a decision we can make now. Reclamation sends a letter over to National Marine Fisheries Service.

Identifying this year as a critical dry year, a designation, which triggered certain actions in the biological opinion. A one-to-one inflow to export ratio, which, once again, will help, later on this spring, provide some certainty for our water users on what the parameters will be for operations of our private facilities.

Lastly, as I mentioned, we work very closely with the state, and I think Director Cowin is going to talk more closely about the temporary decision that was filed with the State Water Resources Control Board, which resulted in the order last week, which was described in a press conference last week. That is one of the actions that got identified in the water plan. We're happy that we moved forward quickly in a close partnership, all hands on deck.

I just wanted to express my appreciation to the key agencies working together, NOAA Fisheries, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Reclamation, California Department of Water Resources, California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Some good decisions made on how to implement the board's order on very short order. One of the other items I wanted to talk about today is to announce that we are making a funding opportunity announcement available today to the public.

This is an agricultural water efficiency and water management improvement program that the Bureau of Reclamation has been running with NRCS at the Department of Agriculture. We've been doing this for three years now. This year, in the face of the drought conditions we're facing, both Reclamation and NRCS are greatly increasing the investments in this program.

Carlos Suarez from NRCS will talk a little bit about the accomplishments we've had the last couple of years, but that funding opportunity announcement is being made available today. I think the timeframe for proposals for grants in that program are due March 24th. The grants opportunities available from Reclamation are up to a million dollars per project.

We will be looking for some very good projects, working with the stakeholders and the agricultural community. This is available to entities in California, agricultural water districts, Indian tribes, anybody with a really good water efficiency proposal. We look forward to seeing those, and Reclamation making, our investment decisions, which will trigger work with NRCS also. We can look at delivery systems, improvements in efficiency of deliveries systems as well as farm improvements.

We also, last Friday, announced an agreement amongst the parties of the San Joaquin River Restoration Settlement that I just wanted to briefly highlight. Once again, this agreement is intended to save water immediately. By terms of the settlement, in a critically dry year such as this, the restoration flows would cease as of March first. In agreement with the parties, we have moved that up a month to save approximately 13,000 acre-feet in Millerton Lake. That will be available to the Friant water districts for public health and safety purposes.

We're doing this in a way that I think also furthers the restoration program. Allow us to do some studying on how to move fish through the system. Collaboration in the face of this drought is no more evident than that particular agreement that we announced last Friday.

Finally, I know that there's a lot of interest in the Reclamation's allocation announcement. I know the state, last week, made their announcement on the State Water Project. Obviously, we're going to be at the very low levels in the Central Valley Project.

We are looking at the order from the State Water Resources Control Board, seeing how that affects our operations. In addition to folks south of the Delta, we have folks on American River and north of the Delta.

We're running the calculations numbers so that we can announce, in approximately two weeks' timeframe, the initial application for all CVP water contract holders. I just wanted to point out that that's the timeframe that we will make our official, initial, allocation announcement.

Scott Smith: I'm not sure who to address this question to, but I saw some text talking about \$14 million in funding. Is this part of the federal funding that was announced yesterday by Secretary Vilsack or is that new money? If you could clarify that for me first.

Michael Connor: This is Mike Connor with the Bureau of Reclamation. That is not part of the announcement that Secretary Vilsack made yesterday. These are additional resources made through a partnership between the Bureau of Reclamation and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. We anticipate Reclamation will provide up to \$7 million in grants. That would be matched by NRCS as part of the funding opportunity announcement being made available today. It's a separate program with additional resources for California.

Mike Darger: Yes, Mike Darger with the UC-San Diego newspaper in San Diego. I'm not sure if anyone can answer this question, but we're hearing a lot about grants to farmers and to conserve water. We're not hearing anything about special assistance to farm workers, who are a part of the impacted communities. Can anyone address that issue? When we will see any assistance for those people?

Michael Connor: Once again, Mike Connor with the Bureau of Reclamation. Through the National Drought Resilience Partnership, we have been having conversations with the state of California and the governor's office related to operational issues right now, so we've been focused on the water supplies. We have also been coordinating at the federal level with other agencies not involved in water operations to talk about the relief programs that we know will be necessary come this year.

As to the timing, and when, and those specifics of those programs, I don't have those details, but it has been very much a part of the conversation, recognizing that once you get past water supply, there are obviously economic impacts that need to be addressed and also as we move on in the season, obviously there's fire risk. There's just many levels of coordination that we're going to need to undertake.

Mike: If I may follow up, which agency would take the lead on assisting communities of farm workers?

Michael Connor: Well, some of those agencies...I'm not familiar with those specific programs, but certainly, part of the conversation has included entities within the Department of Commerce, FEMA, and I think the USDA has some relief programs too, so I know those folks have been talking about the programs that they can offer.

Lauren Summer: Hi. I saw in the plan you guys released today that there's up to 50,000 acre feet of benefit from a few different measures regarding Old and Middle River Index and it's an incidental take for delta smelt. I would just curious about how that works. Is it just a recalculation of how those things are measured, and how would that result in more water?

Michael Connor: I would just absolutely agree with the point that you've made, Mark, with respect. Those are improvements in operations that we've identified as part of the plan, they're intended to increase efficiency, so that we can maintain our responsibilities under biological

opinions that we operate under, under the water quality standards we operate under, in a year where there's water available to provide through the Specialized Project on State Water Quality.

This is not that year right now. We're looking at bare minimum levels of water supply at this point in time. Certainly we hope the hydrology changes and improves somewhat, and we want to be prepared with those improved operations when it does. But for right now, there's not an immediately additional supply to be had.

Chris: Question for Mr. Connor. There's a bill before Congress today that would make changes to the Endangered Species Act. I was interested to read in the release that so far, at least, the delta smelt has been a non-factor in the exports from the Delta?

Michael Connor: That's correct. I think Regional Director Lohofener made that point. We have not had any water supply restrictions on our operations due to the biological opinions of this water year. In fact, I think we haven't had any restrictions related to the delta smelt since April of last year. We've been operating to the water quality standards up until this point in time and other obligations that we have, but we haven't restricted the pumping operations yet due to the Endangered Species Act.

Chris: In your opinion, how much good would the bill before Congress do in helping relief help in the drought?

Michael Connor: Well, I think from that standpoint, the bill would provide exemptions to the Endangered Species Act, et cetera, it would not provide additional water supply under the hydrology that presently exists.

Chris: Do you see any positive aspect in that bill that could help?

Michael Connor: Well, I haven't gone through the bill thoroughly, and they took the bill directly to the floor of the House of Representatives, and not through committee where we could testify on that bill. But the administration I think, as of today, has indicated publicly that it opposes the bill, and primarily because our goal in making it through this drought year is to take actions that can provide water or relief immediately in the short term, while still maintaining the ability to work very closely with California on its coequal goal of improving water supply reliability overall while still maintaining, protecting, and conserving the Bay Delta environment.

That bill does not satisfy those goals, and so for that reason the administration, similar to Governor Brown, is opposing the enactment of the bill.

George Dorman: Yeah, this is for Mr. Connor. You mentioned in your remarks that it was clear last summer that we were entering a period of drought. A lot of people's wearying criticism...I'm George Dorman from in Sacramento. We're hearing criticism that the bureau failed to act on that knowledge sooner, despite warnings from some of the Folsom Lake stakeholders, regarding the American River system in Folsom Lake releases. Can you respond to that please?

Mark Cowin: Yes. I saw the story about the concern about our operations at Folsom. I would say we've operated under the requirements that we have, both with Folsom as part of the overall

Central Valley Project. We used the facility. We have to maintain certain releases for protection of the fish, we need to maintain certain releases to downstream water users, and we need to maintain certain releases for water quality standards as part of that overall system.

From that standpoint, we continued to make releases last year that we needed to insure that we were compliant with all those standards. Again, and in the fall, we've ramped down the releases to conserve storage as much as possible. We worked very closely with those contractors who take water from Folsom, we had a meeting with them yesterday. It was a very good exchange.

We've, I think, done what we could to preserve storage. I certainly didn't hear any complaints in the meeting yesterday about our operations. Moreover, I think we're looking at contingency plans this year to the extent that we may need a temporary pumping station later on this year to insure that we can maintain those deliveries.

It's a delicate balance with a lot of requirements downstream. But we are cognizant of the needs of those water users supplied from Folsom and we work very close with them to make sure we can keep deliveries.

George: Those modifications are being made now, but could they have been done several months ago to prevent the dire situation at Folsom?

Mike Connor: Those were the required some relief from the standards, and I don't think there was an opportunity at that point in time. From that standpoint, the operative needed to and maintain, conserve storage as soon as we could.

Ben Adler: Could you just sum up, big picture, what kind of assistance you're announcing today and who it's for?

Michael Connor: Actually, it goes back to my beginning comments. We want to provide access to information, so that people understand the nature of this drought, the depth, and how long it is anticipated to last, and the programs available to deal with that. You heard some of that today.

We wanted to announce actions that we're taking operationally that I think have meaning. It's meaningful and it increases the water supply right now, such as the restoration of the San Joaquin River and the saving of 13,000 acre-feet. We want to provide some clarity as to operations over the next couple months. That's part of our CVP Water Plan, those actions.

We want to continue to make investments. Yesterday's announcements that USDA made, and today's announcements with Reclamation and NRCS on good investments that we need to make to increase conservation, water efficiency, so that we build long-term drought resiliency in California.

The message is all of these things have benefit. All of these actions have benefits. More importantly, we have an all-hands-on-deck approach at the federal level, in close coordination with our partners at the state, in recognition of the many impacts that are happening in California. This is probably the start of a whole series of announcements and actions that we will continue to look to make as we have a serious situation in California.

Ben: The actions specifically say there's a whole bunch of them. It's not just the one, the San Joaquin. Then a lot of these, water..? They don't make much difference.

Michael Connor: Well, some of them don't. Some of them are decisions that we're making in the event that the hydrology changes, and we have an opportunity to maybe increase operations for water supply. We think that they're important enough today. Some of those do have meaning today.

The scheduling announcement that we made with our contractors last week, providing them certainty to their access of water that's currently stored in the reservoirs and it mentioned San Joaquin. It's a whole range of actions that have benefits now, and in the midterm, and getting into next year and some of the conservation projects that we hope to undertake.