

Headline: Water shortage ominous, Rationing may surface in Southland next year

Publication: Los Angeles Daily News

Date: September 6, 2007

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Southern California water officials are drawing up plans that could force rationing in some cities as early as next year, officials said Wednesday.

For now, residents are being asked to voluntarily use less water, but the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California warned that mandatory rationing could become necessary for the first time since 1991.

The immediate trigger for concern arose from U.S. District Judge Oliver Wanger's ruling last week that to protect the delta smelt, a small fish threatened with extinction, water imports from Northern California must be cut by up to 30 percent.

Officials said the threat of earthquakes and flooding, saltwater intrusion and aging levees in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta compound the problem.

"We have further evidence that the delta is in crisis, if there was any doubt about it," said Lester Snow, director of the state Department of Water Resources.

Officials said Wednesday that they are still trying to sift through Wanger's ruling to determine how much water they will be able to move through the delta and into Southern California.

Wanger did not specify how much less water could be pumped from the delta. Instead, he focused on protecting the smelt by slowing the water that flows into the pumps.

Tim Quinn, president of the Association of California Water Agencies, said that in a dry year there could be a 25 percent reduction in the amount of water pumped from the delta.

The MWD is preparing an allocation plan that would spell out how much water it might be able to provide the 26 cities and water agencies that it serves in six counties, including Los Angeles and Ventura counties, said Roger Patterson, the district's assistant general manager.

If the district tells its members it has less water to provide them, it would be up to them to decide how to ask residents to cut back.

"The question is how soon do we need to go into that kind of decision-making. Do we have to do that in 2008, or do we rely on our reserve account - or (banked water) savings - to not do that in 2008? Those are the policy decisions that will be made."

The district imports about 50 percent of the water used by member agencies. About two-thirds of the water comes from the delta and the rest from the Colorado River.

The amount of water the district stands to lose from the court decision amounts to more than 10 percent of all the water its members use in a typical year.

In the city of Los Angeles, which relies on the district for nearly 70 percent of its water, officials already are asking residents to use 10 percent less water this year. But it's a voluntary program.

"If we have rationing in Los Angeles, it won't be the first time that that has happened," said David Nahai, president of the board of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power

Commissioners. "If that is what will be needed in order to safeguard our water supplies, well, so be it. But we'll have to see just what this plan is that Metropolitan Water District will be putting forward."

The MWD plans to present its allocation plan to the board in the fall. But Patterson said officials will hope for plenty of rainfall this winter and voluntary conservation before they seek mandatory cuts.