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Powerful Farmers Negotiate Deal for Billions of Gallons of Water in Parched California

By Garance Burke
The Associated Press

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Fresno, California - The U.S. government appears poised to turn over the rights to billions of gallons of water to a politically connected group of farmers in California, where most people are being asked to conserve.

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Landowners in the Westlands Water District would gain the rights to 1 million acre feet of water under a proposed settlement federal regulators are likely to present Wednesday. An acre foot translates to the amount needed to cover one acre with a foot of water.

That's 15 percent of the federally controlled water in California, which would make it the largest grant to irrigators since the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation was created in 1903, agency officials said.

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The Westlands Water District, a coalition of giant agribusinesses in the fertile San Joaquin Valley, draws its water from the Central Valley Project, a vast irrigation system that also supplies drinking water to about 1 million households.

If drought-like conditions persist in the West, the deal would guarantee the farmers' irrigation pumps will flow, even if that means some cities in the San Francisco Bay area will get less drinking water.

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"Can a proposal that appears to put a small group of farm operations ahead of the taxpayers and our fish and wildlife resources be justified because it may help one federal agency deal with a specific drainage problem?" said Hal Candee, a senior attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council who is participating in the negotiations.

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Westlands declined to comment, saying Sen. Dianne Feinstein had asked participants to refrain from speaking about the negotiations in advance of Wednesday's meeting.

Feinstein said in a statement that the purpose of the meeting is "to examine whether the serious drainage issues facing the Valley can be resolved."

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The proposed settlement, documents for which were obtained by The Associated Press, would give the Westlands farmers a stake in a massive reservoir, millions of dollars in pumps and pipes, and permanent rights to enough water to serve 8 million people.

It is one of two settlements being considered. The second proposal would offer landowners

a contract for less water, but would still ensure that Westlands farmers get their water before cities in Santa Clara and Contra Costa counties.

Westlands is the nation's largest water district, and its members include Harris Farms, one of California's biggest farming operations, and Tanimura & Antle, the nation's top lettuce grower.

A decade ago, the district sued the government after a botched federal project left thousands of acres of cropland tainted by salty, polluted runoff, and caused the death or deformation of thousands of birds. The proposed water-rights deal would settle that lawsuit.

Westlands recently hired two former Bush administration officials to help negotiate the deal with the Bureau of Reclamation, a division of the U.S. Department of the Interior. Susan Ramos, a former assistant regional director at the Bureau of Reclamation, and Jason Peltier, former water policy adviser at the Interior Department, both took management posts at the district.

Either plan would need congressional approval. Bureau officials say the proposals would be cheaper than an official plan registered with the courts that would cost \$2.6 billion to retire almost 200,000 acres of tainted Central Valley cropland and clean up salty runoff from surrounding areas.

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