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50 percent chance of rationing for water districts by spring

By Ben Baeder, Staff Writer

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There is a 50 percent chance Southern California's main water agency could ration water deliveries by spring, according to a report released Tuesday.

Previously, the agency said there was a 33 percent chance of rationing.

"We would basically be ... capping water supplies to our local agencies," said Bob Muir, a spokesman for the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

The MWD is the umbrella agency responsible for providing water to smaller water districts and cities serving 18 million Southern Californians would have to pay extra.

"It imposes some pretty sizeable penalties, triple penalties," said Tim Jochem, general manager of the Upper San Gabriel Valley Municipal Water District, which buys some of its water from the MWD.

"It'll take water from like \$500 an acre-foot to like \$1500 an acre-foot," Jochem said.

The Upper District covers most of the San Gabriel Valley, stretching from South Pasadena to Glendora.

In a worst-case scenario, the plan would likely result in higher water prices, said Tony Fellow, a director of the Upper District and MWD.

"What's going to happen, is you're going to see water prices going up," he said. "Water has been cheap. I hate to say that, because I pay a lot here where I live in Arcadia. But it's going to be like gasoline."

The policy change followed a decision by the Department of Fish and Game to restrict water deliveries to Southern California from waters near Sacramento.

Pumping water into aqueducts kills the delta smelt, according to the Department of Fish and Game.

"The population of the delta smelt has dropped to an all-time low," said Harry Morse, a spokesman for Department of Fish and Game.

The MWD gets up to 70 percent of its water from the Sacramento area, Muir said.

This year, the MWD is eligible for only 15 percent of its normal share of Sacramento-area water, he said.

In addition, drought conditions near Sacramento - possibly caused by the La Niña weather condition - are further decreasing the habitat of the small fish.

La Niña's cold-water conditions force Alaskan storms to stay north of California, often leading to dry winters.

Biologists think that leaving more water in the San Joaquin/Sacramento delta will help fish breed.

Because many water agencies in the San Gabriel Valley have their own wells, the area is somewhat buffered from scaling back by the MWD, said Brian Dickinson, general manager of the Valley County Water District in Baldwin Park.

In Whittier, Councilman Greg Nordbak oversees water delivery to about half of his city. He also sits on the San Gabriel Basin Water Quality Authority, which is charged to clean up the area's groundwater.

He said it would be "disappointing" if the water agencies started penalizing homeowners and other water users.

"I think government can get carried away with these penalties," he said. "I'd like to see them do a voluntary program with incentives. Give them some incentives to reduce and then put some teeth in it if people go too far over."

Fellow said California needs to get serious about finding a long-term solution for water needs, such as taking water from further north in the river system near Sacramento.

"The state needs to quit messing around and get something done," he said.

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