

ACCESS TO RIVER WATER DENIED

S.J. DISTRICT LANDOWNERS WILL USE MORE GROUNDWATER THIS SUMMER

By **Alex Breitler**
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LODI - On a map, the North San Joaquin Water Conservation District appears torn in two by the meandering Mokelumne River.

This year, however, the district won't get a drop from the river that runs through it.

The East Bay Municipal Utility District, which exports Mokelumne River water to 1.3 million people, says there's not enough to satisfy everyone despite that an upstream reservoir as of Monday was storing slightly more water than normal.

The news is a step backward for rural North San Joaquin, which has struggled for years to obtain more river water in lieu of pumping from the area's dwindling underground aquifer.

"It's pretty frustrating," said Joe Petersen, a farmer and president of the water district, mostly north and east of Lodi. "Something needs to be done. My children are going to be suffering from no groundwater, while we have an out-of-area district reaping the benefits."

EBMUD asked the state for a water right to the Mokelumne in 1949, one year after the local district applied. The state gave the right to EBMUD, based on the assurance that a canal would be built to ship water from the American River to San Joaquin County.

That canal was never finished.

Today, North San Joaquin can pump Mokelumne water only during wet years, when EBMUD doesn't need it.

This was not a wet year, but North San Joaquin sought an exception. It asked for 2,500 acre-feet of water that it didn't use last year. That's less than 1 percent of the 293,980 acre-feet stored Monday at Camanche Reservoir, northeast of Lodi.

EBMUD denied the request. While reservoir levels may be relatively high thanks to a wet 2010-11, this past winter brought less than half of the normal snow and rain. The issue isn't so much what the reservoirs look like now, but how they might look next November after they are drawn down over the long summer months.

"We can't just give water away," said Eileen White, manager of water operations for the utility. "This is all dictated by a very complex water rights agreement. All we do is follow the agreement."

The lack of river water means landowners will suck up more groundwater this summer, but there is a longer-term consequence, Petersen said. It might also discourage those landowners from paying for needed infrastructure to take more Mokelumne water in the future, allowing the district to someday take full advantage of the limited water right it does possess.

A contentious fee to pay for that infrastructure was struck down by angry residents. Petersen said it may be time for another attempt at a fee - perhaps smaller, this time.

"Our task is to try to educate the public," Petersen said. "If we all work together, we're going to benefit."

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