Farm coalition says upcoming California water cuts will fallow 1M acres

By Debra Kahn

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A coalition of farmers pushing for major water infrastructure improvements released a study today estimating that upcoming water cuts will result in 1 million acres being fallowed in the southern Central Valley.

The analysis by University of California, Berkeley economists David Sunding and David Roland-Holst estimates that the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act and other anticipated supply reductions could force 20 percent of the valley's 5 million acres of farmland out of production. It also finds that job losses will be more heavily concentrated in poorer and more polluted areas.

The "Water Blueprint for the San Joaquin Valley" group hopes to use the analysis to support its policy requests, including repairs to damaged canals and new endangered species rules for pumping water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. The group is also seeking increased groundwater recharge and retirement of some farmland.

"We're trying to find palatable, low-hanging-fruit solutions that collectively we can all get behind," said the group's interim executive director, Austin Ewell.

Ewell said the group — 60-odd water districts, agricultural companies and trade groups, including Harris Farms, the Wonderful Company, the Santa Clara Valley Water District and Westlands Water District — briefed Gov. Gavin Newsom's office on the analysis last month. They've found traction with some Valley lawmakers, including state Sen. Melissa Hurtado (D-Sanger), whose CA SB559 (19R) last year sought $400 million to fix the sinking Friant-Kern Canal, another group request.

The blueprint shows that new water rules will "debilitate the economic infrastructure in the Valley — a region that already lacks access to its most basic needs," Hurtado said in a statement.

But farmers have an uphill battle to engage environmental justice and disadvantaged community groups. One group instrumental in the passage of last year's CA SB200 (19R) and $130 million in ongoing associated funds to clean up impaired drinking water systems reacted negatively to the plan.

"[I]ndustrial agriculture and dairies do not have an economic right to continue profiting from over pumping water they have no right to, while causing communities of color to lose access to
drinking water," said Michael Claiborne, senior attorney with Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, in a statement. "If these industries are really interested in the health and economic well being of communities, they will work with residents to better manage water and create jobs that are helpful, not harmful."