

Farmers fear being dried up by proposal

Many worry that plan to curb water use will doom livelihood.

BY LAURA WIDES

The Associated Press

HOLTVILLE — Despite the wilting summer heat, John Hawk has always loved working his vegetable and alfalfa farm, flooding the rows of dry earth with imported Colorado River water and watching his sons maneuver the tractor.

But these days, the fourth-generation farmer is more worried about lawsuits and the future of his farm than the size of this year's onion and carrot crop.

Like nearly 300 other farmers in the Imperial Valley, Hawk is at the heart of a debate about how to reduce California's overreliance on the Colorado River. State officials must develop a plan to reduce their use of river water by the end of the year or risk a threatened cutback from the U.S. Department of Interior.

A key element of that plan, part of a deal struck with six other states that draw from the Colorado, would be transferring water from Imperial Valley agricultural interests to San Diego.

Farmers would have to fallow some of their land for that to happen and would be paid to keep their land idle. Their primary concern is ensuring they won't be held liable for any potential damage that following could cause to the environmentally troubled Salton Sea.

"Here to me is the catch: For 15 years we've been accused of not being efficient and letting water go to the sea ... Now the environmentalists have said, 'Keep running water into the sea,'" Hawk said.

To save water, farmers in recent years have tried various ways to reduce runoff from their fields. But that runoff also is the sea's primary water source. Fallowing land will reduce that runoff, potentially leaving the sea to grow even saltier and jeopardizing the habitat it provides for fish and thousands of migratory birds.

How the Salton Sea will get the water it needs as the state reduces its share of Colorado River water is one of the largest unanswered questions in the state's water debate. The state has to cut its share of Colorado River water by about 18 percent by 2015.

"We're pretty much in turmoil," said Larry Gilbert, who owns an 800-acre alfalfa farm about 14 miles north of the Mexican border.

Tentative plans call for up to 200,000 acre-feet to be transferred each year from valley agriculture to San Diego, or 10 percent of the valley's total water use. A vast and arid region bordered by San Diego County, Arizona and Mexico, the Imperial Valley is California's largest recipient of Colorado River water.

Under the water-transfer proposal, the gradual fallowing of land would keep enough irrigation runoff flowing into the Salton Sea for 15 years to avoid increasing its salt concentration to fatal levels. That would allow time to develop a concerted plan to restore the sea, California's largest inland body of water.

The Legislature approved a bill last week that would absolve the Imperial Irrigation District of liability for the sea and provide up to \$50 million to help restore it.

Farmers remain skeptical, however, saying the language in the bill that is now before the governor is too vague. They fear they could be held personally liable for the sea's health, a price tag that could run into the billions of dollars.

"If the transfer goes through and somebody looks for someone to be responsible for the sea, they're going to look at us," Gilbert said.

The state water plan was dealt a potential setback last week when the Sierra Club, another conservation group and an Indian tribe sued the federal government, saying it has failed to complete mandated studies on restoring the sea. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation responded that the government was required only to outline possible remedies, reports completed during the Clinton administration.

Despite the question of Salton Sea liability, most farmers like many of the terms of the proposed water transfer.

Under the most recent offer, Imperial Valley farmers would receive \$700 per acre up front for agreeing to fallow land over a 15-year period but would not have to begin for the first five years of the agreement. During the following decade, they would receive \$550 per acre annually for fallowing, plus a one-time payment of \$800 per acre for water-conservation measures.

Hawk said in good years he can make a net profit of about \$500 per acre from his 1,800-acre vegetable farm. If he weren't worried about the lawsuit, the offer wouldn't be so bad, he said.

"At the right price, the deal can benefit everybody," he said.

But the offer is less generous for others who depend on a healthy agriculture industry.

For displaced workers, the San Diego proposal offers \$5 million up front for a community fund and another \$100 per fallowed acre over 15 years, an estimated \$40 million over the span of the agreement.

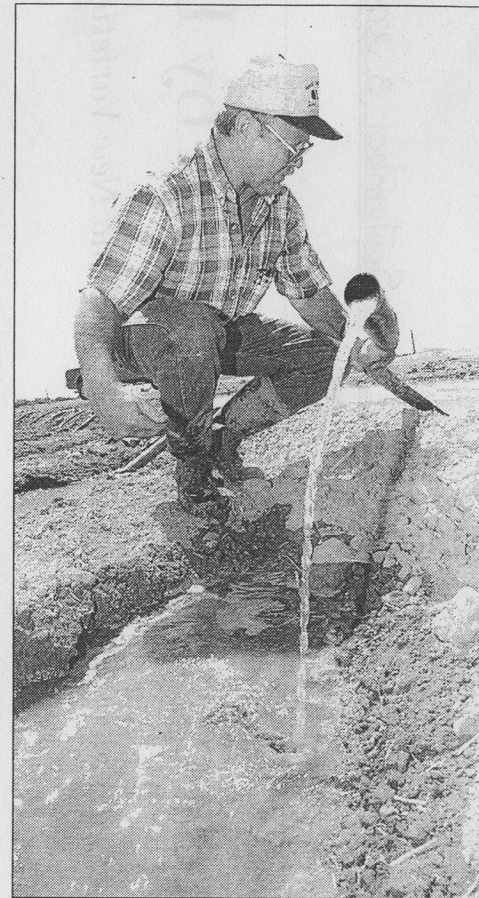
Many in the valley worry that won't be enough to cover the estimated 5,000 farmworkers and others in farm-related businesses who could lose jobs.

Environmental groups said the proposed agreement could turn out to be better for the region's economy. It could force farmers to switch from cheap, overproduced and water-intensive crops such as alfalfa to more profitable farming that will provide longer-term stability for the entire region.

Many residents remain unconvinced.

"We're talking about jobs, tractor and implement suppliers, the tires, the mechanics, the grocery stores. We're talking about the schools and the hospitals. It will have a negative impact all the way down the ladder," said Imperial Irrigation District board president Stella Mendoza.

Beatriz Gonzalez's family owns a restaurant in the town of Imperial, 14 miles north of the Mexi-



REED SAXON / AP

John Hawk sets a siphon tube into place while irrigating his onion fields in Holtville.

can border. She worries her family will lose their customers if the water transfer goes through and farm land is fallowed.

"The valley lives by agriculture," she said. "People will leave here if we lose the water."