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**In drought dilemma, water district cuts off growers to ensure supply for homes**



Ken Todd, co-owner of Todd Brothers Vineyards, walks along a row of vines at one of his vineyards in Redwood Valley on Saturday. Also a board member of the Redwood Valley County Water District, Ken Todd voted with other board members Thursday to shut off the water supply to nearly 200 agricultural customers due to a lack of water. *((Alvin Jornada / For The Press Democrat))*

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A small water district in Mendocino County will be shutting off the valves Monday that supply irrigation to more than 2,000 acres of vineyards and other crops, leaving nearly 200 farming customers without their main source of water, a shortfall that likely foreshadows what's ahead statewide for many growers as the drought stretches on.

There just isn't enough water in Lake Mendocino, the main reservoir in the upper Russian River basin, to supply all water users, officials said.

For the Redwood Valley County Water District, that means prioritizing deliveries to its 5,000 residential customers over its farmers, as required by state law.

“We had no choice. It's the last thing we wanted to do,” said Ken Todd, a Redwood Valley water board member who owns 150 acres of vineyards and manages another 150 acres for others in the valley, located about 8 miles north of Ukiah.

Under the best of circumstances, Todd said he expects to lose 20 percent of the winegrape crops on about half the vineyards he oversees — the ones with only small reservoirs to make it through the growing season. At worst, it could be a total loss this year for those vineyards, he said.

**The 50-year-old Redwood Valley water district is in a pinch because it has a limited right to water from Lake Mendocino. In dry years, that right is practically non-existent. The district has operated under a decades-long moratorium for new hookups because of the situation.**

On Thursday night, however, district officials said they made an unprecedented springtime decision, voting 3 to 1, with one abstention, to cut off water supplies to all of their growers.

The move looks to be the first instance of a water supplier halting deliveries on the North Coast amid the current drought.

It comes after California last year recorded its driest year on record, and as farmers in the Central Valley, the state's main agricultural region, and agencies serving more than 25 million residents are facing drastically lower deliveries, with just 5 percent of their requested allotment expected from the State Water Project this season.

On the North Coast, which has different water supply, growers are expecting curtailments as well.

“This is going to be a very difficult year for everybody,” said Devon Jones, executive director of the Mendocino County Farm Bureau.

The Redwood Valley water district has long struggled with securing an adequate water supply for its customers. Its officials have pushed various ways to address the shortfall, including raising the height of Coyote Dam at Lake Mendocino to store more water and creating a new diversion from the Eel River to boost supplies.

The state's current three-year drought has revived the problem in a new, more urgent way, leading to the earliest seasonal curtailment that district officials and others in the area can recall.

“I don't believe they've ever cut agriculture off for the main part of the season,” said Janet Pauli, a grape and pear grower who sits on several local water agency boards.

The decision follows a failed attempt to get federal regulators to increase water diversions from the Eel River to the Russian River, which feeds Lake Mendocino. The district pumps out of the lake.

Local water agencies and farmers have criticized the denial of additional water, accusing regulators of mismanaging water resources and adding a “regulatory drought” to nature's shortfall.

Federal regulators said they squashed Redwood Valley's emergency request after weeks of negotiations because they are prohibited from doing anything that might further harm threatened and endangered fish in the Eel River.

**“It did not fit into our description of an emergency,” said Dick Butler, supervisor of the National Marine Fisheries Service's North Central Coast office in Santa Rosa.**

**An emergency, according to the agency's response, means “a sudden, unexpected occurrence, involving a clear and imminent danger, demanding immediate action to prevent or mitigate loss of, or damage to, life, health, property, or essential public services.”**

**In its list of emergencies, the agency cites fire, flood, earthquake “or other soil or geological movements, as well as riots, accidents or sabotage.” It did not include drought and excluded frost-protection or “other routine agricultural practices.”**

**“In particular, the request does not clearly indicate that this is a sudden, unexpected occurrence ...,” agency officials stated, while noting they understand the drought's impact on Redwood Valley and water users statewide.**

**The agency tempered its response by saying that it expects there will be enough water in Lake Pillsbury, an Eel River reservoir, to allow for increased diversions later this summer without granting an emergency request.**

Redwood Valley had hoped to get an additional 800 acre-feet from the proposed emergency diversion.

Instead, the district will have to make do with 355 acre-feet — about 116 million gallons — purchased from the Russian River Flood Control and Water Conservation Improvement District, which holds Mendocino County's right to 8,000 acre-feet of water in Lake Mendocino.

Redwood Valley had a contract to purchase up to 1,300 acre-feet a year of surplus water from the Russian River district but it was canceled because there is no surplus water this year.

With its limited rights and tentative supply, Redwood Valley has long been among the hardest hit local water providers during dry years. This year, it landed on the state's list of areas most vulnerable to the drought, along with Cloverdale and Willits.

Still, farmers all along the Russian River are expecting the state to impose severe cutbacks, or worse—move to suspend their individual rights to draw from the river.

"We're trying to figure out who's going to be cut first," said Jones, the Mendocino County Farm Bureau director.

For growers, the orders could come based on seniority of water rights. Residential users would be last in line.

Recent rains have helped alleviate the problem to a small degree. Lake Mendocino is currently at nearly 50 percent capacity and Lake Sonoma, the largest regional reservoir, is at more than 76 percent.

The Redwood Valley water district is the only supplier in Mendocino County that serves both agricultural and residential customers.

Most vineyards in the valley have water reservoirs, but many are not big enough to hold sufficient water to both spray vineyards for frost protection and to irrigate through the dry season, said Todd, the water district board member.

**As long as there isn't a freeze in the next month, there should be enough water to keep vines alive and produce some amount of wine grapes, albeit less than usual, said UC Davis Cooperative Extension winegrape adviser Glenn McGourty.**

"It's not like it's the end of the world for wine growing," he said.

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