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Mountain House water source dries up

Outdoor irrigation could soon be entirely banned in San Joaquin County's newest community, more evidence that the pain of the drought is not limited to local farmers.

Mountain House, a planned community of about 9,600 people, buys its water from the Byron Bethany Irrigation District near Tracy.

But on Friday, state officials announced that Byron Bethany can no longer divert water under its century-old water right, along with 114 other water districts, farms and companies up and down the Central Valley.

The announcement was no surprise. But Mountain House must now scramble to either secure an alternate supply, or impose massive cuts on its residents.

"The drought is beginning to really hurt people where they live, and Mountain House is no different," the community's general manager, Ed Pattison, told his Board of Directors just two days before the cuts were announced.

The state's so-called "curtailments" require water users to cease diversions within seven days, or face penalties up to \$1,000 per day. However, the state says it will consider — on a case-by-case basis — allowing some water to be delivered for health and human safety purposes.

If that happens in Mountain House, the town would be left with about 50 gallons per person per day, Pattison said last week. Current usage is about 97 gallons per person per day.

Essentially cutting the water supply in half creates the "very real possibility" that all outdoor watering will be banned, Pattison said.

"That would basically mean that Mountain House would lose potentially hundreds of thousands, if not millions of dollars in landscaping that has already been put in place, and is one of the beautiful aesthetics that brings people to Mountain House," he said.

The board gave him permission last week to seek extra water for purchase, at a likely cost of at least half a million dollars to get through the rest of the year.

But finding that water could prove difficult. At least one such potential seller, the Manteca-based South San Joaquin Irrigation District, has water stored in New Melones Lake, but that water has to be used within the district itself unless special permission is obtained from the state, said General Manager Jeff Shields.

South San Joaquin hoped to supply Mountain House with water under other senior rights, but as of Friday those rights, too, have been interrupted.

"There is a practical impact to these curtailments, and it's a serious one," Shields said.

Mountain House's water supply is unlikely to be completely shut off.

The town will need to justify its case for water for health and human safety purposes, said Michael Cockrell, director of the county's Office of Emergency Services.

And if that doesn't work, a state program provides emergency drinking water to drought-stricken towns.

"They can do bulk water delivery tanks, or put tanks at every home," Cockrell said, adding, however, that that option would probably be much more expensive than allowing the irrigation district to pump water for health and human safety.

Mountain House formed as a community services district in 1996, attracting many Bay Area commuters seeking affordable housing. The community master plan calls for an eventual population of 44,000 people.

Losing the community's relatively new landscaping would be a "dire impact," costing hundreds of thousands of dollars or perhaps millions, Pattison told his board.

But, he added, "My arguments to others outside of Mountain House regarding this economic plight fall on somewhat deaf ears because the agricultural sector, as well as other communities, are losing tens of millions of dollars."

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Before the drought, on July 5, 2008, Jaidan Sullivan, then 2, left, and then 17-month-old Zachary Rosado, both of Mountain House, cooled off in the fountain at Central Community Park in Mountain House.