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SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Amid severe drought conditions, California officials announced Friday they won't send any water from the state's vast reservoir system to local agencies beginning this spring, an unprecedented move that affects drinking water supplies for 25 million people and irrigation for 1 million acres of farmland.

The announcement marks the first time in the 54-year history of the State Water Project that such an action has been taken.

Many farmers in California's Central Valley, one of the most productive agricultural regions in the country, also draw water from a separate system of federally run reservoirs and canals, but that system also will deliver just a fraction of its normal water allotment this year.

"This is the most serious drought we've faced in modern times," said Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the State Water Resources Control Board. "We need to conserve what little we have to use later in the year, or even in future years."

State Department of Water Resources Director Mark Cowin said there simply is not enough water in the system to meet the needs of farmers, cities and the conservation efforts that are intended to save dwindling populations of salmon and other fish throughout Northern California. With some rivers reduced to a trickle, fish populations also are being affected. Eggs in salmon-spawning beds of the American River near Sacramento were sacrificed after upstream releases from Folsom Dam were severely cut back.

A snow survey on Thursday in the Sierra Nevada, one of the state's key water sources, found the water content in the meager snowpack is just 12 percent of normal. Reservoirs are lower than they were at the same time in 1977, which is one of the two previous driest water years on record.

State officials say 17 rural communities are in danger of a severe water shortage within four months. Wells are running dry or reservoirs are nearly empty in some communities. Others have long-running problems that predate the drought. Many towns and cities already have ordered severe cutbacks in water use.

"This is not about picking between delta smelt and long-fin smelt and chinook salmon, and it's not about picking between fish and farms or people and the environment," he said. "It is about really hard decisions on a real-time basis where we may have to accept some impact now to avoid much greater impact later."

Water conservation

Earth may be known as the "water planet", but even though about 70% of its surface is covered by water, less than 1% is available for human use. The rest is either salt water found in oceans, fresh water frozen in the polar ice caps, or too inaccessible for practical usage. Water supplies are finite and we can all help protect this critical and precious resource.

With the U.S. population doubling over the past 50 years, our thirst for water tripling, and at least 36 states facing water shortages by this year, the need to conserve water is becoming more and more critical.

The average American family uses more than 300 gallons of water per day at home. Roughly 70 percent of this use occurs indoors. Water also plays a big role in our local communities. Without water there would be no local business or industry. Firefighting, municipal parks, and public swimming pools all need lots of water. An array of pipes, canals, and pumping stations managed by our public water systems are needed to bring a reliable supply of water to our taps each day.

An easy way to understand individual water use is to look at your water bill—not just the amount due, but how much water you used. There's much you can learn just by looking at your bill. Does your water use increase during certain times of the year? How does it compare with your neighbor? It also takes a considerable amount of energy to deliver and treat the water you use every day. For example, letting your faucet run for five minutes uses about as much energy as letting a 60-watt light bulb run for 22 hours.

Sometimes it's easy to forget that we also use water in ways we don't see every day. Water is used to grow our food, manufacture our favorite goods, and keep our businesses running smoothly. We also use a significant amount of water to meet the nation's energy needs.

Strains on water supplies and our aging water treatment systems can lead to a variety of consequences for communities:

- Higher water prices to ensure continued access to a reliable and safe supply
- Increased summer watering restrictions to manage shortages
- Seasonal loss of recreational areas like lakes and rivers when the human demand for water conflicts with environmental needs
- Expensive water treatment projects to transport and store freshwater when local demand overcomes available capacity

Droughts happen somewhere in the country every year and climate change has the potential to increase stress on water resources. In September 2012, 65 percent of the country was in drought. Drought is sometimes called the slow motion natural disaster. In order to create a more sustainable water future, cities and states are coming together to encourage water conservation as a way to reduce demand.

Some drought ideas:

- Follow the rules
- Look for leaks
- Consider an upgrade
- Take a sprinkler break
- Go the extra mile