

Local reactions mixed to environmental pact

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Immediate reactions from Kern County agricultural leaders were mixed Thursday to the historic environmental agreement signed in Sacramento by Gov. Pete Wilson and federal officials.

Fred Starrh, a west side farmer and a board member of the Kern County Water Agency, said the agreement will bring some reliability to state water supplies. Although it dedicates more water than ever before to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta environment, it at least assures local farmers that wildlife officials won't keep turning off the pumps in the Delta every time they fear a fish is threatened.

The agreement also means that more California Aqueduct water will arrive in Kern County since environmental restrictions were put in place in recent years, he said.

"It also says they are not going to list another species as endangered for another three years. That gives us some time to get some changes made to the Endangered Species Act," Starrh said.

Starrh hoped the agreement would stabilize the farming economy on the west side in Kern County's San Joaquin Valley, where thousands of acres of farmland have been abandoned in recent years because of water shortages, due in large part to environmental protection efforts.

Joe MacIlvaine, president of Paramount Farming Co., which has

extensive operations on the west side, said he had yet to read the agreement but fears it will do little to stop the idling of farmland.

Thousands of acres of orchards and vineyards have been bulldozed in the Lost Hills area since 1991.

"The document has been written in language that is not easily interpretable," he said.

Jack Hunt, president of Tejon Ranch, also said his concerns for farming on the west side have not been squelched. Much of the farmland there depends solely on water from the aqueduct.

"The shelf life of the agreement, as they called it, is only three years," he said. "While that gives you some assurances in the short term, it still leaves you with uncertainties for the long term."

"You still are not going to be able to borrow money to plant orchards in areas that depend on aqueduct water. It takes longer than three years for those orchards to produce a crop."

On a more positive note, Bakersfield water attorney Ernest Conant said it was significant that representatives from urban areas, farm areas, environmental groups and governmental agencies signed off on the same document. While the agreement does not promise to solve the problems faced by Kern County's west side farmers dependent on the aqueduct water, it does show that people from different interest groups have begun to compromise, he said.