Calif. farmers bracing for less water

By Mark Grossi, Fresno Bee

The next train wreck in California's drought is headed for the San Joaquin Valley this week when federal leaders forecast how much river water farmers can expect to irrigate nearly 3 million acres this summer.

Most folks in farm country are expecting the same number as last year – zero for both east and west sides of the Valley. Consecutive years of no river water would be another unprecedented body punch from a drought dating back to the winter of 2011-12.

After one of the driest Januaries on record, a fourth drought year seems inevitable, say many water leaders. In response, manic planning and big spending are spreading quickly in the Valley's $37 billion farm belt. One farmer drills a $1 million well, another pays $1,400 an acre-foot for scarce extra water – five times the cost in an average year.

More rain has fallen this year than last, so why is the winter turning into another dud? Storms have been warm and mostly focused in Northern California. The Sierra snowpack is actually slightly smaller overall than it was last year.

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