Obama seeks more coordination on dealing with drought

By Darlene Superville, AP

WASHINGTON — President Obama on Monday directed the federal government to come up with a less reactionary and more long-term strategy for dealing with drought.

About 12.5 percent of the continental U.S. was experiencing drought as of mid-March, said Alice Hill, a key Obama aide on this issue.

That translates into more than 39 million people, or about one-eighth of the U.S. population, living with drought in the lower 48 states, mostly in the West and with much of California suffering through its fifth year of dryness.

Obama issued a presidential memorandum and separate action plan Monday that sets forth a series of goals for the federal government. They include sharing more information about drought risks with state, regional, tribal and local authorities, and improving coordination of federal drought-related activities.

Drought affects the food supply and infrastructure, hurts the economy and increases energy costs, according to the action plan. Drought conditions are also expected to become increasingly more severe due to climate change. Combating climate change is a top environmental priority — as well as a legacy issue — for Obama, who has tackled the matter on a variety of fronts.

“With climate change, we know that drought will intensify and continue to cause us significant challenges,” Hill said in a telephone interview with the Associated Press, explaining some of the rationale behind the president’s call for a more

comprehensive and less reactionary strategy for coping with drought.

The goals contained in the action plan are to be carried out using existing resources.

Federal agencies last year pledged $110 million in drought aid after Obama met with governors and other leaders from seven Western states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Montana, Oregon, Wyoming and Utah.

The White House hosted a “water summit” on Tuesday, which was World Water Day, to raise awareness of the importance of safe, sufficient and reliable water resources.

Obama’s drought initiatives were released as he traveled in Havana on a historic, three-day visit to Cuba.