

FARMERS' WATER ALLOCATIONS CUT

Jerusalem THE JERUSALEM POST in English 1 Mar 84 pp 1, 2

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[Text]

Water allocations for the country's farmers will be cut by between 10 and 25 per cent starting this morning, sources at the Water Commission said yesterday. For the time being, the general public will not be affected, though citizens are being asked to show extra restraint in water use.

The restrictions are being applied partly because of the season's below average rainfall and partly because of a failure at the Sapir pumping station on the Kinneret shore due to a fire there last week.

The fire damaged one of the station's three pumps, and smoke and soot in the underground facility have made it difficult to get the other units working. It will take another week or two, with help from Swiss and German engineers, before a full check of these units can be made. Normally, the station pumps over a million cubic metres of water daily.

The exact cut in the farmers' water allocation will only be determined when the state of the pumps at Sapir is known.

But even if the two pumps do become operational again soon, the Mekorot water company will still find itself supplying 15 to 20 per cent less water than usual from the Kinneret. "This means less water for them in July and August," warned Ze'ev Ashkenazi, Mekorot head. He urged farmers to take this into account now in planning summer crops.

Zvi Grinwald, director of water allocations at the Water Commission, explained that starting today,

any excess of water that farmers use this month will be deducted from next year's quota, which starts on April 1.

The drought committee of the Agriculture Ministry toured the Negev this week and agreed that the region has been the hardest hit in the country by this year's poor rainfall, with 350,000 dunams of crops severely affected.

While any drought compensation is normally paid on the basis of crops in the fields on May 15, the region's farmers were yesterday told they may turn over their fields prior to that date to offset further losses from weeds when preparing next year's sowing.

Farmers interviewed yesterday on the restrictions still seemed hopeful that they would not be too adversely affected. While this season's rainfall has been very low, an official declaration of drought may be made only several weeks hence, after a government committee has checked the damage and determined which areas have been hardest hit. And the farmers still hope that March rainfall will improve the situation.

But one Negev farmer insisted that even a 10 per cent water cut would be serious in his area.

Ezra Meir, head of the Fruit Production and Marketing Board, was confident that fruit trees would not be watered less, but forecast that cotton and vegetable growing would be harder hit.

Cotton Production and Marketing Board head Yisrael Gal said that a record 630,000 dunams have been scheduled for cotton planting this year. But water restrictions could cut this back. Nevertheless, he hoped that last year's 570,000 dunams would still be planted.