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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Merced Irrigation District Announces 2003 Irrigation Season

Merced, California. The Merced Irrigation District has announced that its Board of Directors voted unanimously to begin the 2003 irrigation season on March 10, 2003. According to Ross Rogers, General Manager, the board made its decision after a staff presentation outlining current Merced River hydrology, snow water content in the 1,000 square mile Merced River watershed as well as short and long-term weather forecasts.

Rogers noted that there will be no in-District surface water curtailment for 2003, "because of aggressive on-farm water conservation efforts as well as improved District system efficiencies and reduction in operational discharges thanks, in part, to \$12 million of conveyance system capital improvements made by the District since 1993."

"That's the good news," Rogers stated. "On the other side, the region has had only 35% of average precipitation during both January and February, historically wet months. Soil conditions are currently dry in the western region of the District today. Without significant additional precipitation, irrigation water will be needed throughout the 100,000 acre of irrigated lands."

"The effects of three consecutive dry years in the Merced River watershed are creating serious problems," said Ted Selb, the District's Assistant General Manager for Water Resources. Despite above-average precipitation in November and December 2002, Selb stated that Lake McClure, which serves as a primary water storage facility, had only 367,000 acre-feet at the end of February 2003, which is 68% of average and only 36% of capacity. "The lake level has not been seen this low since 1992," Selb said. That year only 2 acre-feet of water per acre was available to in-District growers.

Long-range weather forecasts for the remainder of the winter/spring 2003 vary widely. The National Weather Service long-range outlook calls for a slightly better than 50-50 chance of above normal precipitation for March. Other weather prognosticators are calling for below average conditions for the remainder of the rainy season with a fast-waning El Nino.

District staff reported to the board that snow water content, a source of vital water during the summer months, is approximately 75% of average for this date, and only 65% of the April 1st average.

Because of the lack of available water, the Board of Directors determined that no surplus water will be made available this year to irrigate approximately 10,000 acres of land just outside the District boundary around the perimeter of the District. In past years, when surplus surface water was available for sale outside of the District's boundary, deliveries to those areas were made consistent with the District's Merced River water rights.

Due to the pending consolidation with the El Nido Irrigation District, water deliveries will continue to that neighboring district.

The District's Board also authorized the selective use of high efficient District deep wells to supplement surface water deliveries. The District's surface water traditionally replaces groundwater that would have been pumped from deep water groundwater wells. This practice, known as in-lieu groundwater recharge, has been successful in maintaining a healthy groundwater supply within the District.

According to Selb, irrigation water will be available in all areas of the District by Friday, March 14, 2003. Water orders can be placed beginning 8:00 a.m. on Monday, March 10th. Water Applications and Owner/Tenant Agreements (if applicable) should be completed and returned to the District's office at 744 W. 20th Street as soon as possible in order to begin water service. For more information, please call the Irrigation Operations Water Order office at (209) 722-2720. For growers in Livingston/Snelling areas, call toll-free at (800) 750-2720. Water orders will be taken 24 hours per day, 7 days per week.