

NEWS CLIPS

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Resource Conservation and Public Outreach

Organized by date

Strong winter storm to bring several feet of snow to Sierra Nevada, Lake Tahoe

Source: LA Times 3/3/16

An atmospheric river drawing moisture from the tropics is expected to blanket the Sierra Nevada and Lake Tahoe area with more than 3 feet of snow through the weekend, forecasters say.

The strong winter storm will start off light Friday night with snow levels at 7,500 to 8,000 feet through Saturday, said meteorologist Tony Fuentes of the National Weather Service in Reno. Up to 3 feet of snow could cover the Sierra crest.

A heavier band of moisture will pummel the area Saturday night into Sunday morning with snow levels quickly dropping to 5,000 feet, bringing about a foot of powder to the Lake Tahoe area, he said. The snowfall will continue through Monday and likely affect traffic through the mountain passes.

That's good news for California's snowpack, which recently experienced a slight drop due to a dry spell that hit the state in the past few weeks, Fuentes said.

"Any snow is good," Fuentes said. "Anything that we get now is beneficial."

The state's snowpack levels started off strong and above average in January. But snow levels are now hovering between average and slightly below average, he said.

Moisture levels were "rather disappointing" in California during February, according to meteorologist Dave Miskus of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Prediction Center.

Miskus, who authored the latest findings for the U.S. Drought Monitor report, said the average snow water equivalent on Feb. 1 for the northern, central and southern Sierra was 120%, 117% and 105% of normal, respectively.

All three areas had declined March 1 to 89%, 85% and 75%, respectively.

Despite the decline, Miskus remained optimistic.

The reservoirs, he said, were mostly stable due to carryover from January's rainstorms and snow melting along low mountain elevations during February.

"The peak [snow water equivalents] in the Sierra normally occurs on April 1, so there is still March left to build the snowpack," he wrote in his report.

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California's snowpack falls below average, sparking new drought fears

Source: LA Times 3/1/16



After a promising start to winter, California's snowpack has shrunk to below-average levels, causing state water officials to redouble their calls for water conservation.

On Tuesday, the statewide snowpack stood at only 83% of average for the day, a result the California Department of Water Resources blamed on fall and winter seasons that have brought only "moderate precipitation" and "relatively warm temperatures."

Officials say that traditionally, half of the state's annual water falls as rain or snow during December, January and February, so the declining state of the snowpack is cause for some concern.

A healthy, robust snowpack in the Sierra Nevada is crucial to easing California's prolonged drought and the water contained in the snow is what is most important to officials. In normal years, the snowpack supplies about one-third of California's water needs as it melts and runs off into reservoirs during the hotter spring and summer months.

"Mother Nature is not living up to predictions by some that a 'Godzilla' El Niño would produce much more precipitation than usual this winter," Department of Water Resources Director Mark Cowin said in a statement. "We need conservation as much as ever."

DWR officials conducted the agency's third manual snow survey of the season on Tuesday, trekking 90 miles east of Sacramento to Phillips Station. Surveyors measured snow there that was 58.3 inches deep with 27.1 inches of water content – the best for the early March measuring period since 2011, officials said.

But the daily reports from about 125 automated snow sensors across the state provide a more accurate picture. Electronic readings of the northern Sierra Nevada showed the snowpack's water content at 89% of normal for March 1; the central region was 85% of normal; the southern region was 75%.

In March 2015, the water content in the snowpack statewide was only 19% of normal.

“Right now, we’re obviously better than last year but still way below what would be considered adequate for any reasonable level of recovery,” said Frank Gehrke, chief of the California Cooperative Snow Surveys Program.

DWR officials have said the statewide snowpack would need to be 150% of average on April 1 to make a serious dent in, or potentially end the drought. They are expected to manually measure the snowpack again on or around that day, when snowpack levels traditionally peak before beginning to melt.

Editorial

Proposed DWP rate hike isn't high enough

Source: LA Times 3/1/16



This week, the City Council will consider a proposal to raise electricity and water rates for homes and businesses in Los Angeles. The plan would increase the typical residential customer's monthly Department of Water and Power bill incrementally each year so that at the end of five years it would be \$21 more than today. Unlike past attempts to hike rates, this proposal has been met with broad support. The DWP held dozens of briefings with neighborhood councils, business groups and environmental organizations. The city's ratepayer advocate called the increases "just and reasonable." Mayor Eric Garcetti said the higher rates are needed to modernize the city's aging electricity grid and water system.

The DWP is mired in bureaucracy and politics, and it struggles ... because managers answer to multiple layers of political bosses.-

They're right. The City Council should approve the increased charges without delay. But even as it does so, it should acknowledge honestly that the new rates would still be too low to pay for everything the DWP needs to do, and that the utility will fall further behind on maintenance and modernization unless and until city leaders reform the DWP and its governance structure.

The utility's needs are vast. The DWP has to finish covering all the city's reservoirs to protect drinking water; step up dust control in the Owens Valley as part of a legal settlement; clean up contaminated groundwater in the San Fernando Valley; switch from dirty coal to clean, renewable sources; modernize its gas power plants and rebuild its coastal power plants so they no longer suck in ocean water and sea life, and help customers make their homes and businesses more water and energy efficient. And those are just the mandates. The utility also has ambitious plans to recycle toilet water, capture storm water and help more customers install rooftop solar. And there remains a staggering backlog of basic maintenance to be done, from 100-year-old water trunk lines to splintered power poles.

In analyzing the rate proposals, the ratepayer advocate found that they wouldn't allow the department to replace water main lines fast enough to keep the system from springing leaks. Nor would there be enough money to replace the pipes and valves that have outlived their useful life.

Given the enormous demands, why shouldn't rates be raised even more? Because — as the ratepayer advocate has noted and DWP officials themselves concede — the utility has been having difficulty in recent years spending the money it has collected. The DWP is mired in bureaucracy and politics, and it struggles to hire enough workers, to contract with outside companies for work and to make timely business decisions, because managers answer to multiple layers of political bosses.

That's why the rate discussion has been inextricably linked to the debate over how to reform the agency's governance. The City Council has begun holding forums on this, but governance reform is complicated — and a vote of the people is required to change the city charter.

There have been five separate recommendations in 16 years to fix the DWP's structure — including one last month from Councilman Felipe Fuentes — but City Hall has not had the appetite for serious change. A number of questions need to be addressed, including: Should the ultimate decisions on issues such as rate hikes and hiring of a new general manager continue to be made by elected officials in City Hall or by a more independent board shielded from political meddling? Do civil service rules need to be loosened to allow the utility to do its own hiring, and if so, how can workers be protected from favoritism, nepotism and politicized hiring? How much of the money paid by ratepayers should be sent to City Hall to feed its general fund budget needs?

Reform is essential and long overdue. But that important discussion shouldn't delay the higher rates needed to keep the utility running now. The rate hike plan includes some smart changes designed to encourage conservation and more efficient management. The water rate proposal, for instance, increases the number of pricing tiers from two to four. Customers who stay within in their allotment would pay a modestly higher rate. By 2019, the most excessive users would pay a rate nearly twice as high as the lowest users. The power rate increases the money available to help customers make their homes and businesses more efficient.

The council should enact the rate hikes.

Drought hasn't been all bad—we've learned some things too, California water chief says

Source: LA Times 3/1/16

It was the final Wednesday of a warm, dry February, and here as in much of California it seemed that spring had made an early arrival.

The sky was blue, temperatures mild. Almond and fruit trees were ablaze with blossoms. Along the highways, poppies were in full flower, competing for attention with ubiquitous Caltrans message boards that warned: "Severe drought/Limit Outdoor Watering."

Indeed, however pleasing in the abstract, the early turn of seasons has been not so welcome to those who keep watch on California water — and, in particular, to the Sacramento official who spent the last year cajoling the state's urban residents to cut back significantly on their water consumption.

"Crazy-making" is how Felicia Marcus, chair of the state water board and the political face of the ongoing drought, characterized a February in which nature suddenly turned off its taps. "Nervous-making."

This had been relentlessly ballyhooed as the year of El Niño, and the hope for a drought-busting winter tended to obscure caveats from climate specialists that, with long-term weather prognostication, there never is a sure thing.

December and January storms did create enough snow and rain to build the Sierra snowpack to somewhere near normal. Yet Marcus rated the wet year to date a "C-minus."

"After what felt like a deluge, and what felt like a massive snowfall, we now find ourselves at about average for this time of year," she said in an interview. "Obviously, the hot and dry February is disheartening for everyone. It feels weird."

That said, she is not without hope for what March and April might produce. At the mention of the drought-easing "March Miracle" of 1991, she placed her hands together as if in prayer and lifted her eyes toward the heavens, or at least the ceiling — a human emoji to aptly depict where California stands as it contemplates the possibility of a fifth year of drought.

"We will be grateful for every raindrop and every snowflake that we get," she said. "We'll be counting them. But we just can't know, so we have to cross our fingers. And hope."

She noted that the state is in better shape than a year ago, when the crucial Sierra snowpack went missing altogether.

Still, without a late-breaking miracle, the wet year has not brought enough relief to fill the major reservoirs, replenish the over-tapped aquifers or allow suburbanites to ditch their shower buckets and turn on the sprinklers full bore.

On the bright side, Marcus can look back on the last year and see any number of advances being made in how Californians capture, use and even think about water — lessons forced by drought, but with longer-term applications as the state grows and climate change alters the water landscape.

For example, that half of all urban water consumption is spent on landscaping seems to have sunk in, as has a greater appreciation for the hardiness of lawn grass. In Northern California at least, lawns that went brown in the summer and fall are now green — following the natural cycle of the foothills.

"It is hard to kill grass," Marcus said. "And while I don't think in the long run it's realistic to think people are going to keep their lawns brown forever, I do think folks have learned they don't need as much water as they have been dumping on them.... So that is a real 'aha' for people."

Also demonstrated through eight months of mandatory cutbacks is that reducing consumption by nearly 25% is doable — a mark Marcus feared would be unattainable when the order went out.

Marcus grows most animated when discussing a movement underway at many local agencies up and down the state — one aimed toward integrating traditional water delivery with enhanced recycling, storm-water capture, underground storage and the like.

Not the stuff of statues and naming rights, perhaps, but collectively these efforts have the potential to create a new day for California water.

"This is a high-value, low-glamour play," Marcus said, ticking off multiple efforts underway from the Southland to Santa Clara. It is essential work, she said, if climate change as predicted undermines the Sierra snowpack in the not-so-distant future.

"All of the conflicts we have today are going to seem like a picnic if we don't change how we use water," she said. "And that means everything. It means conservation. It means recycling. It means storm-water capture. It means desalination in the appropriate circumstances. And it means more storage, above ground and below."

In the meantime, there is the looming dry season to address.

Is she worried?

Yes.

"I worry that we are going to be in another year of drought. I am worried about those communities, particularly small rural communities in the Central Valley, that are out of water and need a respite from that...."

"I worry about small farming families that don't have senior water rights and have to fallow their fields and the citrus growers who don't have groundwater they can rely on."

"I worry about how those tensions exacerbate nonproductive rhetoric that pits urban versus agriculture, or fish versus farmers, or fish versus people. Or picking on a given crop

when what we really need to be doing is embracing an all-of-the-above strategy so we can all get better together, rather than wasting time vilifying a number of very legitimate needs."

The emergency declaration that allowed mandatory conservation was extended earlier in February, a move that met with some resistance but with each dry day seems a bit more prescient.

The amount of mandated conservation, if any, will not be decided until the end of April, giving nature, and El Niño, a last chance to get busy. If it becomes necessary, Marcus is not worried that Californians, drought fatigue or not, will fail to rise to the moment, again.

"I think folks can do it again if the situation is as dire," she said. "If it is not as dire, you don't want to make them do it."

So for now it is a waiting game.

"Is this rain and snow we have gotten just a punctuation mark in a longer sentence, a longer paragraph, a longer story? Or are we going to get a year or two breather before the next one?"

Only March and April are left to provide an answer.

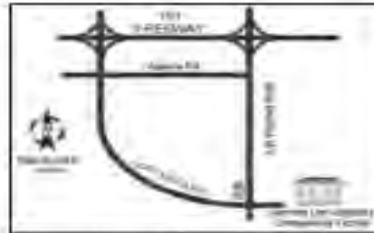
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