

NEWS CLIPS

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**Resource Conservation and Public
Outreach**

Organized by date

Water rate hike under fire

Residents speak out against proposed 30.1 percent increase

MIKE HARRIS

Ventura County Star 1/20/2016



More than 100 residents attended a California Public Utilities Commission hearing in Newbury Park Tuesday night in opposition to proposed rate hikes by the California American Water Co. MIKE HARRIS/THE STAR

More than 100 Thousand Oaks, Newbury Park and Camarillo residents packed a public hearing this week on a proposed three-year, 30.1 percent rate hike by the California American Water Company.

They were not happy.

Speaker after speaker denounced the proposed increases, plus a planned consolidation of rates in the company's districts in Ventura, Los Angeles and San Diego counties.

Tuesday night's frequently heated, two-plus-hour meeting was held by the California Public Utilities Commission at the Palm Garden Hotel in Newbury Park. No decision was made on the proposed hikes.

'We don't want to be raped over this issue,' Greg Cauchon, president of Amethyst Life Sciences in Thousand Oaks, said, sparking applause from the incensed audience. 'I oppose the rate hike. I oppose the consolidation plan. And if California American continues to look like an ongoing criminal enterprise, I oppose California American, too.'

The Coronado-based company serves about 22,000 customers in Thousand Oaks, Newbury Park and Camarillo.

Another speaker, Janey Schmitt, angrily invoked one of President-elect Donald Trump's signature lines.

'I think it's time to drain the swamp,' the Newbury Park resident said, also to loud applause.

Others speakers described the proposed increases as 'crazy, 'exorbitant' and 'outrageous.'

California American spokesman Brian Barreto said a number of factors are fueling the proposed hikes, including increased costs the company has incurred and the state's drought.

'Because of the drought, our customers have done a great job in terms of lowering and conserving their water use, but unfortunately, that has resulted in lost revenue, so we are asking for an increase to make that up,' he said.

A third factor is infrastructure investments the company wants to make throughout Southern California 'so that we can continue to provide safe, reliable and affordable water to our customers,' Barreto said.

He said the company considers the proposed 30.1 percent increase over three years to be a reasonable one. If the commission approves the company's proposed rate consolidation, the average residential bill in its Ventura County district would increase 22.3 percent in 2018, 4.2 percent in 2019 and 3.6 percent in 2020. The company says the 'consolidation is expected to benefit customers by spreading costs of large infrastructure projects over time and over a larger base of customers,' according to the notice of Tuesday night's hearing sent to customers.

Yet, without consolidation, the company is proposing a smaller average residential rate hike of 12.2 percent over three years: 7.4 percent in 2018, 2.5 percent in 2019 and 2.3 percent in 2020. Jay Spurgin, Thousand Oaks' public works director, spoke at the hearing, saying the city opposes the proposed consolidation.

'The proposed rate increases (under consolidation) ... seem to be completely out of line with the other two water systems in town,' he said of the city's water division and California Water Service. 'Historically, the costs among the three have been very similar. This proposal puts Cal Am way out ahead.'

Even the smaller proposed hikes without consolidation 'are still higher than they should be,' and higher than the city's and California Water's, Spurgin said.

Even so, 'the city really has no control at all over their rates,' he said.

The hearing was held solely to take public testimony on the proposed consolidation and increases, not to make a decision.

The panel's five commissioners are not expected to vote on the proposals before late this year, Barreto said. If they approve them then, the new rates would go into effect Jan. 1.

'We're a long way from a vote,' Sophia Park, a commission administrative law judge who presided over the hearing, told the audience.

Water board investigates Ojai oil tank explosion, fire

CHERI CARLSON

Ventura County Star 1/20/2017

A regulatory board charged with protecting water quality has ordered a company to show that it has cleaned up the site of an oil tank fire near Ojai.

On Aug. 5, petroleum inside the storage tank caught fire at the oil lease on Santa Paula Ojai Road near Sisar Creek. The tank itself did not collapse, but fire exploded out of the top of the tank just after 8:30 a.m.

Ventura County firefighters heard the explosion from a nearby station and responded, finding flames and black smoke pouring out of the tank.

The petroleum fire took about an hour to boil over and burn itself out.

The Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board and several other local and state agencies investigated the fire. Last week, the water board issued an investigative order seeking records regarding the cleanup.

'The Regional Board is concerned that the water quality in the area may have been impacted or potentially impacted by the unauthorized release,' the agency said in the order.

The tank, which was only partially full on Aug. 5, held an estimated 1,800 gallons of oil. While the tank didn't collapse, some oil spilled onto the nearby soil when it boiled over the top.

A team from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife's Office of Spill Prevention and Response, on scene the day of the fire, reported no environmental impacts to surface water in the area.

That tank, however, had not been properly permitted from the Ventura County Air Pollution Control District, whose employee happened to be on site for an inspection the morning of the fire.

Days after the fire, the local agency issued a violation notice to Silver Exploration Co. for installing and operating the tank without first getting a permit.

The tank apparently was a 320-barrel crude oil storage tank that had replaced a larger, permitted tank. "Our assumption was that it was added in the last 12 months and hadn't gotten a permit," said Mike Villegas, the county's air pollution control officer. The company said it had turned in an application for the permit, but the agency said it had no record of an application, Villegas said. The company has since paid a \$758 fine to settle the violation. On Sept. 21, the area was re-inspected, the application for a permit was being processed and the site was found to be in compliance, Villegas said.

Cleanup apparently was going on at that time.

According to the Air Pollution Control District, Patriot Environmental Services was working on soil decontamination. The staff member on site said several closed bins were on the site containing contaminated soil, which was being tested by a lab. Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board said Scot Stettler of Silver Exploration Co. said in December that BC Laboratories had completed the soil testing. In its Jan. 9 investigative order, however, the water agency said it had not received any reports.

Stettler, who also was working with the Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources regarding the cleanup, could not be reached for comment for this report.

In its order, the water board required the company to provide a report by Feb. 9 with details about the cleanup, how much oil spilled and the laboratory test results.

It's been one wet winter

By Sylvie Belmond
The Acorn 1/19/2017



WATER EVERYWHERE—As if the rain weren't enough, this fire hydrant on Lindero Canyon Road just south of Agoura Road in Westlake Village broke Jan. 12 and inundated the soggy ground even more. JOHN LOESING/Acorn Newspapers

Recent rainstorms have eased the statewide drought, at least for now, but Southern California still faces supply shortages for a number of reasons, say local water officials who remain cautiously optimistic about long-term water availability.

“Conditions are better this year, but California’s water system is still broken,” said Mike Paule, a director for the Triunfo Sanitation District.

Southern California still faces long-term shortages due to limited storage capacity and pumping restrictions in the Sacramento Delta. The pumps currently run at about half of their capacity, Paule said.

“We’re getting more water down here, but we’re still not able to efficiently fill up all reservoirs due to pumping regulations. Until we solve those problems, we’re just not going to have an adequate supply,” he said.



MICHAEL COONS/Acorn Newspapers

Though the rainy season is off to a good start, it's not over. Many years begin with ample precipitation and then the rain suddenly stops.

Still, the Agoura collection station has received more than 7 inches so far this season. Another inch is coming this weekend.

The snowpack in the Sierras is 50 percent above average, and the level of water stored in the state's network of reservoirs has doubled compared to this time last year.

The wet season continues through April.

During a recent presentation about water to the Ventura County Leadership Academy, Calleguas Municipal Water District spokesperson Eric Bergh said Santa Barbara County and parts of Ventura County that rely on Lake Cachuma and Lake Casitas for their freshwater supplies still face shortages. These lakes remain critically low because they do not receive imported water from the Bay Delta.



SOAKED—L.A.'s December rainfall was more twice more than normal.

The Colorado River basin, which is an important source of imported water for Southern California, also remains in a deficit.

One effort that would help deliver more water to Southern California is the delta twin tunnel project that Gov. Jerry Brown has been advocating despite resistance from some Northern California communities.

Locally, the Las Virgenes Reservoir is at near capacity and the Las Virgenes Municipal Water District is releasing some of the water downstream to make room for more heavy rainfall predicted.

Excess recycled water processed at the Tapia Water Reclamation Facility is also being released into Malibu Creek because irrigation demand is very low.

Releases to the creek at this time of year are normal and permitted, as the district does not have the ability to store the surplus.

If the storms continue through the rest of the winter, the state may increase the amount of supplies allocated to the various water agencies.

For now, conservation measures remain in effect and, without a permanent fix, Paule said, Southern California will continue to be vulnerable to drought.

Both Las Virgenes and Triunfo (Oak Park) water districts recently adopted new fee schedules and do not intend to lower rates as a result of the recent rains. They urge customers to continue their conservation efforts, both indoors and out.

Las Virgenes and Triunfo are developing a plan to build an advance treatment plant that could allow excess reclaimed water to be filtered and stored in the Las Virgenes potable water reservoir.

Remember - irrigation off during the rain
and for up-to 48 hours afterwards!



Print this reminder
www.LVMWD.com/Rain-Signs

03A37B

California's snow dance

New storms are welcome, as long as they're cold



THE NORTHSTAR California Resort in Truckee had prime skiing conditions last week. Officials hope a series of new storms will be cold, adding snow that slowly makes its way into the water supply system. (Gary Coronado Los Angeles Times)

By Rong-Gong Lin II
LA Times 1/19/2017

TRUCKEE, Calif. — With another round of winter storms hitting California this week, the question isn't just how much rain and snow they will dump, but how cold they will be.

The coldness of storms can make the difference between one that adds to the fast-rising snowpack — an essential source of water for the state — and one that also leaves a wet mess.

Northern California was pulled out of a five-year drought by a series of storms over the last few weeks that deposited huge amounts of snow over hundreds of miles of the state's greatest mountain range, the Sierra Nevada.

Officials hope the next band of storms will be cold, adding more snow that will slowly make its way into California's complex water delivery system in the coming months.

Warm winter storms can also provide water storage if rain falls on top of a thick snowpack and refreezes as it drips below. But warm storms can cause other problems, triggering floods when rain hits snow-clogged storm drains in Lake Tahoe towns and delivering clumpy, heavy, wet snow that can pile on trees, causing them to fall and bring power lines down with them.

Lake Tahoe is still digging out from a week that brought its worst winter storm in a decade. In the middle of last week, a warm moment in the middle of a blizzard dumped “Sierra cement” snow, blamed for helping to bring down a centuries-old tree on top of the main electricity transmission line for the California side of Lake Tahoe, plunging the entire region into darkness for more than 12 hours. Just a few days before that, an abnormally warm storm sent rain that washed 10,000 cubic yards of decomposed granite on all westbound lanes of Interstate 80.

So in recent days, locals have been hoping that this week’s storms would bring snow, not inches of rain that an earlier forecast said was possible and could bring flooding back. “Rain is the worst possible thing we can have,” said Kim Szczurek, administrative services director for the town of Truckee.

By Wednesday, the snow dances seemed to be working. Rain made only a brief appearance in Truckee and quickly turned into heavy snow, said Nicki Nelson, who works at a cooking supply store on Donner Pass Road.

“It’s slow and steady and looking beautiful,” said Eric T. Brandt, 54, of Tahoe City, who prepares a daily Lake Tahoe snow report. “The snow we’re seeing — and the feet and feet we’ve been getting for the last two weeks — it’s going to be here until May.”

Longtime residents have remarked how this winter finally feels like the winters of the past, in which big snowfalls were far more common, Brandt said.

The wet snow will still stick to trees and power lines, but at least the region will escape flooding problems, said Steven Poncelet, spokesman for the Truckee Donner Public Utility District.

This series of three storms, which will extend into next week, means California is set to continue its eye-popping run of accumulating snow in the Sierra. With about half the wet season over, precipitation levels have been neck-and-neck with the wettest winter in the historical record, in 1982-83. The northern Sierra has seen double the average precipitation for this time of year. And as much as 10 to 20 feet of snow has fallen at the highest mountain peaks during the most recent storm systems that were much colder than earlier bouts of warmer rains, said UCLA climate scientist Daniel Swain .

For the Tahoe area, it is already the 7th wettest January in 114 years of record keeping, said Edan Weishahn, meteorologist at the National Weather Service office in Reno.

As a result, California's irrigation system is finally working as intended — plenty of snow piling up in the mountains, which can be stored into the summer months there as the stockpile of ice melts slowly, gently quenching the thirst of the state's aqueducts and reservoirs during the long dry season.

Part of the reason California has been hurt so badly in its five-year drought has not only been storms snubbing the state, but precipitation — already meager — falling as rain rather than snow.

“What little did fall as snow tended to melt earlier, because the overall ambient temperature was warmer,” Swain said. “It was a rain-on-dry-ground situation.”

Importantly, the water content in the snowpack in all parts of the state is well above average at this point in the winter. Most of the state's big reservoirs are topped out at the maximum level they can hold while still reserving space to hold water in the event of a flood, said Jeanine Jones, interstate resources manager for the California Department of Water Resources. “And with the prospect of typical winter storms going forward, we would hope to see additional increase in snowpack,” she said.

“It's certainly deeper than anything we've seen in the last five years,” said state climatologist Michael Anderson.

Experts and officials, however, say that long-term warming trends are likely to complicate how California manages its water supply. Temperatures in the Sierra have been rising in the last few decades, which will pose problems for storing ice in the mountains during the winter and spring. Rain has also become more likely at higher elevations over the years, meaning more precipitation is falling as liquid, not snow.

Water is also running off into reservoirs earlier, a reflection of more rain falling in the mountains or snow melting closer to wintertime instead of the spring. “And that's a fact of life that's been happening for 50 years,” said Jay Lund, director of the Center for Watershed Sciences at UC Davis.

In the years to come, as the Earth warms, “these lower-elevation ski resorts are likely to see more rain than snow,” Lund said.

The solutions on how to change California's water supply system won't be easy. It's financially and physically impractical to build enough reservoirs to replace the enormous storage capacity of the Sierra. One idea is moving water saved for droughts from reservoirs to underground storage. Another is moving people out of floodplains, Lund

said, which would help reduce the need to keep reservoirs emptier during the winter to accommodate unexpected floodwaters.

Technology might help. One solution possibly achievable in the coming decades, Jones said, is improving forecasts of precipitation for the coming weeks and months. Such forecasts would allow reservoir managers to keep more water behind dams if the longer-term forecast appears dry. A pilot project is underway at Lake Mendocino in Sonoma County to test this concept.

The three new storms are expected to hit much of the state. The first of the sequence reached California on Wednesday and was already battering the San Francisco Bay Area, trapping a vehicle in floodwaters near Santa Rosa and felling a 40-foot tree, blocking lanes on the Lawrence Expressway in Santa Clara. In the Sierra, traffic was stopped on Interstate 80 for a time Wednesday afternoon following spinouts at Donner Summit.

The second storm is expected by Friday, which could bring snow to the Grapevine, and a third is forecast for Sunday.

The last storm would mark the return of an atmospheric river over California, Swain said. It'll probably be robust across the state but may be most intense in Southern California.

All three rainstorms could give Los Angeles its biggest soaking so far this winter, said Stuart Seto, specialist with the National Weather Service office in Oxnard.

Between 3 and 6 inches could fall in the valleys and on the coast, and up to 9 inches are possible in some foothill and mountain areas. Officials are warning of possible flash floods and debris flow for burn areas and rock- and mudslides along canyon roads.

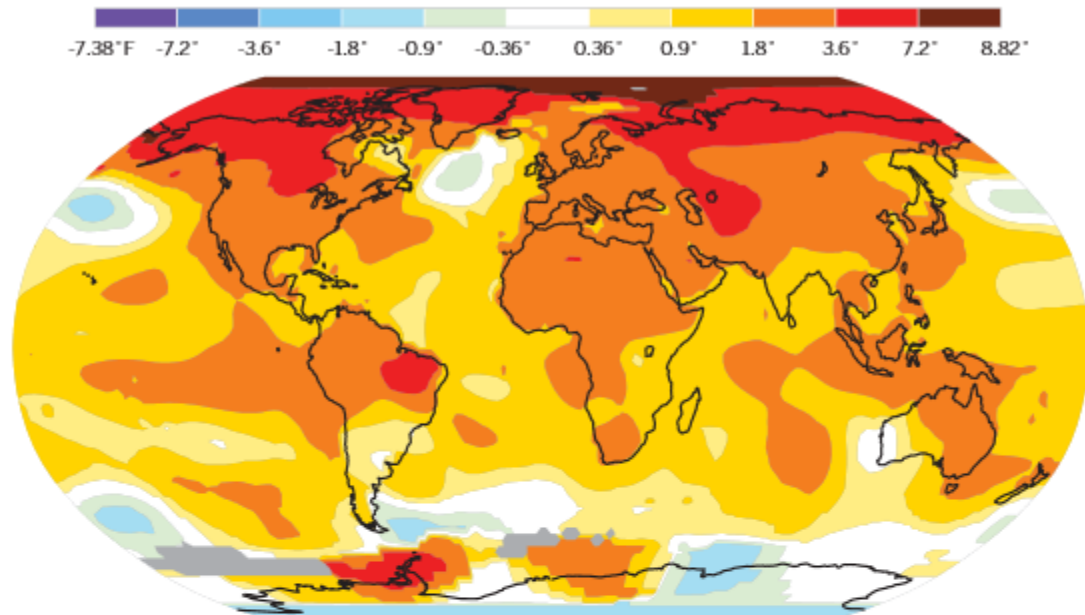
Ski resorts in the San Bernardino County mountains could see 2 to 3 feet of snow, the weather service said. "It'll be crowded in the mountains after this is over," said weather service meteorologist Brett Albright.

Earth breaks heat record

Global temperatures hit new high for third straight year

Just how hot was 2016?

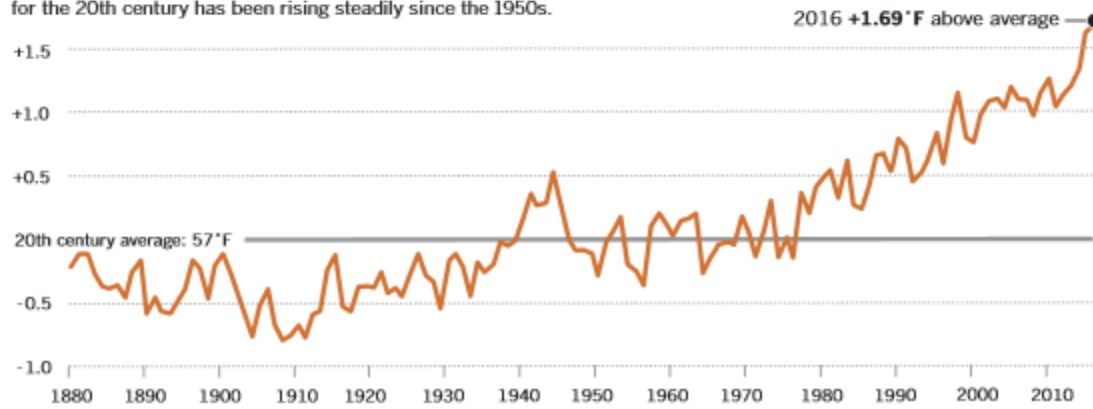
Surface temperatures last year compared with the 30-year average from 1951 to 1980.



Note: Gray areas around Antarctica signify missing data.

Rising temperature

The difference between each year's global average temperature and the average for the 20th century has been rising steadily since the 1950s.



Sources: NOAA, NASA

Los Angeles Times

By Amina Khan
LA Times 1/19/2017

It's official: 2016 was the hottest year on record since scientists began tracking Earth's temperature more than 100 years ago, according to independent analyses by NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The 1.69-degree jump over the 20th century average, according to NOAA, marks the third year in a row that global temperatures have reached record-shattering levels. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration added that the global average temperature for 2016 was 1.78 degrees higher than a baseline period between 1951 and 1980.

Both agencies noted that Earth's average global temperature — which NOAA pegged at 58.69 degrees — was higher in 2016 than in any year since scientists began tracking it in 1880.

“For the first time in recorded history, we have now had three consecutive record-warm years,” said Michael Mann, a climate scientist at Pennsylvania State University who was not involved in the findings. “The likelihood of this having happened in the absence of human-caused global warming is minimal.”

The government reports were released Wednesday as President-elect Donald Trump's nominee to lead the Environmental Protection Agency said he disagreed with the overwhelming scientific consensus that Earth is warming at a catastrophic rate and that human activities are to blame.

“The ability to measure with precision the extent of [human] impact and what to do about it are subject to continued debate and dialogue,” Oklahoma Atty. Gen. Scott Pruitt told senators during his contentious confirmation hearing.

The average global temperature incorporates measurements taken from locations across land and sea, including 6,300 ground-based weather stations, legions of ocean buoys and research facilities in Antarctica.

Those instruments tracked record warm temperatures for eight months of the year. NASA and NOAA agree that January, February, March, April, May, July and August set records; NOAA's list also includes July, while NASA's also includes September.

The global thermostat got a boost during the first part of 2016 thanks to El Niño, a multiyear weather pattern in the equatorial Pacific Ocean that's driven by temperature fluctuations between the ocean and atmosphere. The slight cooling effect from El Niño's counterpart, La Niña, in the latter half of the year couldn't keep 2016 from beating 2015.

The effects of the extra heat were felt around the globe, NOAA said. The temperature in Mitribah, Kuwait, on July 21 reached 129.2 degrees, the highest ever for Asia.

In Alberta, Canada, a wildfire burned about 2,400 homes and became the costliest natural disaster in that country's history. In southern Africa, two years of low rainfall led to serious drought.

Overall, Earth's average surface temperature has risen about 2 degrees since the late 19th century, scientists with NASA said. The bulk of that increase has come since 1980, and especially since the turn of the century: Of the 17 warmest years on record, 16 occurred since 2001, according to NASA.

Both land and sea temperatures hit new highs in 2016, NOAA said.

The surface temperature of the continents was 2.57 degrees above average, and the surface temperature of the oceans was 1.35 degrees above average, NOAA said.

"It was really global warmth that we saw in 2016, even more so than 2015," said Derek Arndt, chief of the monitoring branch at NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information in Asheville, N.C.

The findings were not exactly a surprise: Scientists had predicted 2016 would be even hotter than the previous year's record-breaking temperatures, and data through November seemed to be bearing that out.

Since the start of the Industrial Revolution, humans have released unprecedented amounts of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The results can be seen worldwide, including higher sea levels, acidic oceans, more extreme weather events and local extinctions of species that haven't been able to adapt to changes in their ecosystems.

As the oceans warm and more water evaporates, the atmosphere is able to carry more water — which can lead to more severe storms and flooding, said Richard Rood, a climate scientist at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

"Last year was really quite remarkable with regard to floods," Rood said, pointing to events in Louisiana, the Carolinas and Texas. "Those events strike me as particularly compelling."

While NOAA and NASA used slightly different methods to calculate global temperature changes, their measurements matched well with each other and with other analyses — including one from the nonprofit climate research group Berkeley Earth, which also called 2016 the hottest year on record.

"These data sets are all singing the same song," Arndt said. "The pattern is very clear."

Richard Muller , a UC Berkeley physicist and Berkeley Earth's co-founder, took issue with the idea that today's extreme weather events could be directly linked to global warming. He said the real effects would be seen in the future and probably would affect areas with agricultural production — which could lead to geopolitical conflict.

“In my mind, the greatest threat of global warming is war,” he said.

The U.S. experienced 15 weather-related disasters last year, including drought, wildfire, flooding, severe storms and a hurricane, which together resulted in losses of \$46 billion and the deaths of 138 people, NOAA said.

In addition, 13.1 million Americans living along coastlines are vulnerable to flooding caused by the melting of polar ice reserves, according to a recent study .

The North American continent experienced its warmest year on record, led by rising temperatures in the Arctic. At the northern reaches of the globe, scientists measured an average of 3.92 million square miles of sea ice over the course of 2016, the lowest annual average since their measurements began in 1979, NOAA said.

No other continent broke a record in 2016, but most came close. South America and Africa recorded their second-highest average temperatures, while Europe and Asia had their third-warmest years. Temperatures in Australia were the fifth-highest on record, according to NOAA.

In Antarctica, the amount of sea ice averaged 4.31 million square miles in 2016. That was the second-lowest amount since 1979, NOAA added.

Because La Niña tends to be a cooling trend, scientists do not expect 2017 to break last year's heat record. But like El Niño, La Niña is a short-term weather pattern, and it cannot stop temperatures from continuing to rise in the long term, researchers said.

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Times staff writer Evan Halper in Washington contributed to this report.

Roaring to life

Rampaging American River casts drought out of mind



FOLSOM DAM releases water into the American River on Wednesday. In 2015, the reservoir was at 14% capacity. (Photographs by Gary Coronado Los Angeles Times)

By Joe Mozingo
LA Times 1/15/2017

DESOLATION WILDERNESS, Calif. — Torrents of meltwater coursed down the granite crevices below the moonscape here.

Just miles from its source in the High Sierra, the South Fork of the American River was already roaring down toward the oaken foothills, bursting over the spillways of dams that humans had erected to control it.

As it moved, it gathered streams and rivulets — pink and brown and orange from the minerals they leached. The heavy rain turned dusty creek beds into full-fledged tributaries. Running through narrowing clefts, they burst forth as from hydraulic jets.

Isidro Soberanes was preparing to jump into the maelstrom in a kayak.

He stood at the Chili Bar parking lot watching the South Fork as he had never seen it. Willow trees that had sprouted in drier times now found themselves bending in a 25-mph current, shredding the flow into roostertails of spray. He watched a big sodden log crash at speed into underwater rocks, splintering its lead end, and race on to the next collision.

“I’ll have to watch for those,” said Soberanes, a local professional kayaker originally from Veracruz, Mexico.

“I’ve been waiting for this.”

So had so many. The boom and bust of water has always been the arid West’s existential conundrum. The biggest water projects in the world were built to control it, to allow millions of people to live in places only thousands otherwise could survive. From the Mormon settlers’ first efforts to irrigate the Salt Lake Valley to the colossal dams along the Colorado River to the vastly complex Central Valley Project that transformed California — including this river — American engineers did everything they could to keep water from escaping to sea.

This week’s storm roaring out of a six-year drought provided an explosive reminder that, even with all that plumbing, we survive in a harsh and moody climate.

The 90-mile-long South Fork of the American River brought us to this point. When John Marshall discovered a gold flake at Sutter’s Mill in Coloma in 1848, he set off the original mass migration that would transform the West into one of the world’s great civilizations. Since then, only Herculean efforts by the mighty Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers keep it from falling to ruin.

The three forks of the American River flow into Folsom Lake. Two years ago, the reservoir was at 14% capacity, so low that people could hike to the remains of a Gold Rush-era town that had been submerged when the dam was built in 1955. Last year’s El Niño storms swallowed the site back up.

The storms from Monday to Wednesday brought the lake up 17 feet, approaching the brim. Every second on Wednesday afternoon, 590,000 gallons flowed in and nearly 400,000 gallons roared out of five of its spillways at the other end, twisting into the Sacramento River on a race to the Pacific.

Water managers at the bureau and the Corps of Engineers had it calculated and under control, but a belt of storms like this makes even their efforts look fickle.

For the first time in a decade, water managers opened floodgates on the Sacramento River to turn the vast Yolo flood basin into a veritable inland sea.

“We haven’t seen water like this for 10 years at least,” said Bob Hunden, 82, standing in the rain at Chili Bar.

He stopped by just to take in the awesome power of the river. In the way the vastness of the stars on a clear mountain night elicits that expansive feeling of being infinitesimal in the grand scheme, so can the raw power of a weather system that crossed a big swath of the planet. The molecules in the drops falling on Hunden’s shoulders had risen as vapor thousands of miles away in the tropical heat of the central Pacific.

Condensed into a warm storm system called a Pineapple Express, it hit California and was driven upward by the western slope of the Sierra and Cascade ranges. As the pressure dropped in the thinner atmosphere, the relative humidity climbed. The cold air — and high-altitude dust and microbes blown across the Pacific from deserts in Africa and China — created ice particles.

That ice started to congeal to more vapor and grow bigger and heavier and fall as snow, wringing the water out the sky.

Without that orographic lift of the high Sierra, the clouds might have just kept blowing east.

During the first storm Sunday, the snow melted before it hit the ground, except at the highest elevations, causing fears that it would melt the snowpack and cause a catastrophic flood.

The entire water system in California and the Southwest relies on snowpack — in the Sierra, the Cascades and the Rockies — slowly melting in spring, at rates the reservoirs can handle.

“We like winter storms that snow down to 2,000 feet, followed by a gentle spring,” said Howard Penn, a local paddler and executive director of the Planning and Conservation League, which works to protect the state’s water, air and natural areas.

But he notes that warm winter storms bring benefits. Decades of irrigation in the Central Valley leached out all manner of salts and heavy metals and pesticides from the soil, and those leachates flow out with the farm runoff to pollute the Sacramento Delta, a vital breeding area for fish.

“Now we got a huge volume of water coming down the Sacramento and San Joaquin, flushing the delta out, cleaning out those fish estuaries.”

By Wednesday, the snow level had lowered in the mountains. The flakes fell heavy, not as dry Utah powder but a wet slurry dubbed “Sierra Cement” by skiers.

Avalanche danger closed ski resorts in Lake Tahoe and parts of the roads getting there from the valley. But big concerns of a ravaged snowpack diminished.

Down at Chili Bar, the mood was giddy. With a whole lot of rain hitting the mid- and lower slopes, the South Fork was heaving at about 150,000 gallons per second. A fun spring commercial trip would run on less than a sixth of that.

Soberanes put on a thermal shirt, then a fleece jacket, and sealed himself into a dry suit. He kissed his wife, Fernanda, and his 10-month-old daughter, Alondra, and paddled upstream through some trees in an eddy.

Fernanda got into their old red Ford F150 and headed down Highway 49 to his takeout spot.

In the kayak, Soberanes knew the biggest danger was getting stuck in one of those tree thickets — “strainers” in river-runner parlance — because they catch you like a colander while the fast current pulls you under.

He moved into the 45-degree current and was soon in a section of colliding waves that thrashed him from all directions. Cold whitewater smashed his face every other second.

He launched over massive teepees of brown water and torn-up weeds, then hit several beautiful nonbreaking waves at a stretch of rapids called Meat Grinder, one as high as high as 15 feet.

At this rate, he'd finish an eight-mile run that normally took an hour and a half in about 25 minutes.

Brian Kallen, a rafting guide, going down the fork with friends, kept his eye on a 10-foot log floating next to them for the first 15 minutes. If they got stuck in the trough of a stationary wave, that heavy beast could do a lot of damage, “breaching like a whale on your boat.”

Those deep stationary waves flipped many a boat, launching rafters into the roiling current without a chance to fill their lungs, then — eventually — popping them to the surface to dodge deadly strainers and hope they could scramble to shore before the onset of hypothermia.

The river Kallen knew had totally changed. Giant boulders he once passed by were now underwater and creating drops and waves he had never seen.

Soberanes moved more nimbly on a kayak, so he liked to flirt with such dangers.

Soon he was racing down a fast bumpy section, slaloming between trees, hooting along the way, like a powder skier billowing through the aspen.

He crossed under the old Coloma Bridge, then a rock monument — a good 10 feet into the river today — marking the very spot where John Marshall discovered gold. The sun shone for the first time in days.

At the takeout, Fernanda, 30, sat on a blanket under some mossy oaks, cooing to her baby. The sun lighted up big drops hanging from the tips of tree twigs like chandelier beads. It suddenly felt like a picnic day in the English countryside.

She pointed to her husband as he rounded the bend. “Papa viene,” she said. Daddy’s coming.

He pulled into a little eddy, still amped up on endorphins from the run, and pondered going to the next spot down the river.

“Nah, I got to get to work,” he ultimately decided. His day job is tree trimming.

He’d swap his kayak for his chainsaw. The wind had left him plenty of work.



ISIDRO SOBERANES prepares to kayak on the South Fork of the American River in Placerville on Wednesday. “I’ve been waiting for this,” he said. ☺



GARY CORONADO / LOS ANGELES TIMES

RECENT storms have dropped copious amounts of snow in South Lake Tahoe, as shown Thursday. Avalanche danger closed ski resorts in Lake Tahoe, but concerns of a ravaged snowpack lessened.

Heavy load, more on way



AFTER the recent storms, skiers flocked to Northstar California Resort in Truckee. The town's schools have had eight straight snow days. (Photographs by Gary Coronado Los Angeles Times)

By Rong-Gong Lin II and Joseph Serna
LA Times 1/14/2017

TRUCKEE, Calif. — Across the Sierra Nevada this weekend, residents and officials are assessing the damage from a series of powerful storms before a new round from the atmospheric river arrives next week.

Some homes in northern Sierra communities have been left without power for more than a week because of this week's blizzard, which locals say has been the worst in a decade.

"We had over 10 feet of snow in portions of the community. Everyone had at least 3 to 5 feet of snow, all in about a two-day period. And that's a pretty extraordinary level of snow," said Truckee Donner Public Utility District spokesman Steven Poncelet.

The culprit was a moment in the middle of the week when the storm became warmer. Instead of causing nice, dry powder that comes with colder storms, this system dumped slushy, dripping, heavy snow, which locals call "Sierra cement."

That wet slop stuck to electrical lines and tree limbs. When branches weighed down by snow snapped, they took out power lines with them. Combined with high winds, it was a recipe for problems.

For Truckee, the series of blizzards has been so bad that the schools have been closed because of snow for eight consecutive days, something locals can't remember happening in decades. Some residents have been trapped in their snowbound homes for three days, with some roads only plowed Friday since the last storm began. Even the U.S. Postal Service was forced to close nine offices Thursday, citing the lack of power and access.

Poncelet warned that people returning to their second homes in Lake Tahoe for the Martin Luther King Jr. Day weekend could find downed trees and power lines, and a lot of snow to shovel just to get to their doorway.

But the predicted arrival of another big storm next week could pose problems in Truckee, where rain could cause flooding problems.

"You're going to have now a massive amount of snow on the ground that the rain is going to essentially melt, so the chances of flooding and mudslides is going to be pretty high," Poncelet said.

This week's storms cut off mountain passes and contributed to at least four deaths, and forecasters say there's no sign of a prolonged dry spell anytime soon. Months of intense rain and snow ended a five-year drought for much of Northern California, though the south of the state is still dealing with water shortages.

"Atmospheric rivers happen every year. And for whatever reason, they have been missing California for the last several years," said Tom Dang, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Sacramento. "And they are just aimed at us one right after another this year."

The next storm is expected by Wednesday.

"Taking any kind of action to be prepared is better than taking no action and just thinking about it," said Brad Alexander, spokesman for the California Office of Emergency Services. "If people were impacted by these last storms ... they need to quickly get their emergency plans together. This last one is proof that you need to have one right in front of you."

At least 20 towns, cities and counties have declared states of emergency as a result of the most recent set of storms, Alexander said. Dramatically, all of Truckee and the California side of Lake Tahoe lost power for more than 12 hours after a large tree fell on the main electricity transmission line in the region.

Rural residents in the Napa and Sacramento valleys were flooded out of their homes when heavy rain and snowmelt overwhelmed local rivers. Major highways that were damaged by rock- and mudslides or flooded may be eligible for federal aid, Alexander said. State officials are going door to door to assess the damage but will have their work slowed by next week's storms.

"It would be like one major fire series happening right after another major fire series," Alexander said.

With the biggest blizzard in a decade under their belt, Californians need to work for the next few dry days to clear snow- and leaf-clogged storm drains before the next system hits, the National Weather Service warned.

"Flooding is definitely a concern," said Dawn Johnson, meteorologist with the weather service's Reno office. There is so much precipitation across the Sierra Nevada — at 163% of its historical average Friday, with nearly 20 feet of snow accumulated at Mammoth Mountain and more than 23 feet at Northstar. Flooding is a risk especially at creeks, streams, ditches, low-lying areas and anywhere that has poor drainage.

"Because we're so saturated, all these smaller streams could flood easily," Johnson said.

Next week's version is shaping to be a weaker relative of an unusually warm storm that struck the Sierra last weekend, which dumped 8 to 12 inches of rain on the high Sierra crest before the midweek blizzard. But the latest forecast has some reason for optimism — it's more cold, less wet and not as powerful: only 2 to 4 inches of rain is currently expected to fall on the crest of the mountain range. Rain is expected at elevations lower than 8,000 feet, meaning rain could arrive at the base of some ski resorts while snow falls at the peaks.

Next week's storm will melt some snow, but not the entire snowpack, Johnson said.

California's water year — which runs from Oct. 1 to Sept. 30 — started off remarkably, with four times October's average rainfall, according to the Department of Water Resources. Though November lagged behind, storms in the last two months have helped the northern half of the state bounce back from years of drought.

According to the U.S. Drought Monitor's report released Thursday, more than 40% of California is out of drought conditions, all of it in the northern half of the state. Southern California's conditions have also improved, but it would take at least another year of above-average rainfall to replenish reservoirs and groundwater basins, officials said.

Southern California could receive up to 2 inches of rain with next week's storms, forecasters say.

Despite the weather headaches, many were still celebrating the best snow year in recent memory. At the Donner State Memorial State Park Visitor Center on Friday, there was already 4 to 5 feet of snow on the ground — and it's only the middle of January, marveled Nikki Combs, a park interpreter.

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Lin reported from Truckee and Serna from Los Angeles.



A TOYOTA is nearly submerged on Green Valley Road near Folsom Dam. Despite the headaches, many were still celebrating the best snow year in recent memory. ()

Thank You

After another year of drought,
LVMWD customers continue
to use water wisely.

The Board of Directors,
District management, staff
and Little Drop would like to

Thank You
for your ongoing efforts.



Wishing you and yours the best for 2017.

A Free Family Adventure!

Take a recycling and watershed tour Saturday, February 4

When you send water down the drain, we go to work, safely returning it to the environment. You'll learn how we fulfill that mission.

On this free bus tour, you'll visit Malibu Creek, a Water Reclamation Plant, a regional Composting Facility and learn more about our precious water resources.



Saturday, February 4, 2017
from 8:45 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Tour begins promptly at 8:45 a.m. ending at 1 p.m.

Space is limited, pre-registration is required (walk-ins cannot be accommodated).

A complimentary continental breakfast and light lunch will be provided.

Register online at: www.LVMWD.com/QuarterlyTours

Moderate walking and stairs are part of the tour, close-toed walking shoes are recommended.

Reservation preference is given to customers of Las Virgenes Municipal Water District and Triunfo Sanitation District.

Children under 18 must be accompanied by a responsible adult.



Presented by
Las Virgenes Triunfo Joint Powers Authority

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Ready, Set, GROW!

This Saturday, pick up a load of FREE Rancho Las Virgenes Community Compost and watch your garden grow.

Apply now and when spring arrives, your plants will love the soil enriching nutrients found in RLV compost.

It's ideal for lawns, shrubs, ornamentals and vegetable gardens and it saves water by helping the soil retain moisture.

RLV compost qualifies for the USEPA's "Class-A Exceptional Quality" rating and is the preferred choice of many local gardeners and professional landscapers.



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For more information, visit www.LVMWD.com/community-compost.



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See details at www.LVMWD.com/RecycledWaterFillStation

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www.LVMWD.com
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