

NEWS CLIPS

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**Resource Conservation and Public
Outreach**

Organized by date

County still in 'extreme' drought

Despite greener and damper conditions, reservoirs will take more time to recover

CHERI CARLSON

Ventura County Star 2/10/2017

Trailing much of the state, Ventura County continues to linger under extreme drought conditions, federal officials say.

That's according to the latest map from the U.S. Drought Monitor, a report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Drought Mitigation Center.

This week's map shows less than 1 percent of California in extreme drought.

Meanwhile, 41 percent of the state, mostly in Northern California, is no longer in a drought, a much different picture from a year ago, when nearly the entire state was.

'In your region, conditions definitely are improving, and we have been making improvements on the maps,' said David Simeral, an associate research scientist in climatology and author of the federal report.

One of the wettest winters in years has turned formerly gray and brown hillsides green. But the rain hasn't brought much relief to historically dry local reservoirs.

Rivers have more water and soil moistures have risen, but after five years of drought, reservoirs and wells in the area will take some time to recover, Simeral said.

Lake Casitas, which supplies water to the Ojai Valley and parts of Ventura, sits at just 38 percent of capacity.

Lake Piru is at 14 percent of capacity, officials said.

That's the primary reason that the map hasn't changed more, Simeral said.

A number of groundwater wells in the area also haven't recovered, he said.

This is the first winter since 2011 for the area to get above-average rainfall.

Much of the Ventura County has had 120 to 180 percent of normal rainfall so far this year, ranging from 10 to 21 inches.

Four cities – Camarillo, Moorpark, Oxnard and Port Hueneme – already have recorded as much rain as they normally would get in a year.

'That's a lot of water. But the watersheds have been so dry,' said Jayme Laber, senior hydrologist with the National Weather Service.

It's like a sponge, and it's still absorbing much of the moisture, he said. But if storms continue to roll in over the next several weeks, conditions should continue to improve.

'We'll see water in the rivers,' Laber said. 'That's what we really need to help these reservoirs and help these groundwater basins.'

The Drought Monitor assigns areas to one of six categories: no drought, exceptionally dry, moderate drought, severe drought, extreme drought and exceptional drought.

Locally, the county ranged from moderate to extreme. Just a month ago, most of Ventura County was in the most intense category: exceptional drought. Statewide, the only spots left in extreme drought were a swath of Ventura County near Lake Piru and Lake Casitas, a patch of southwestern Santa Barbara County and a sliver of eastern Los Angeles County. Lake Cachuma in Santa Barbara County also sits far below normal levels, reaching just 16 percent of capacity.

Oxnard sees discord at meeting on utilities

WENDY LEUNG

Ventura County Star 2/10/2017

In the first of four meetings of an Oxnard advisory panel on wastewater rates, there was a lot of testy debate over whether the group should have a chairperson.

Finally, at its third meeting Wednesday, the utility ratepayers advisory panel voted to have David Littell as chairman.

But that decision came after multiple meetings, including a special meeting led by Mayor Tim Flynn to discuss the matter.

The last panel meeting will be Feb. 15 at the Oxnard Performing Arts and Convention Center. The seven-person group formed to give the City Council advice on a wastewater rate increase now has a chairman.

But the arguing and interrupting likely won't end. That's because the crux of the discord is between Aaron Starr, the author of a ballot initiative to repeal wastewater rate increases, and the city staff.

Starr wants panel members to have control of the meeting and not have Assistant City Manager Ruth Osuna take over. He also wants the city to provide a spreadsheet with data used to justify the rate hike.

But Osuna said that spreadsheet can lead to hundreds of scenarios. Instead, she will present the panel at the next meeting with five options. Members can mull those limited scenarios or suggest alternatives.

These discussions have pulled panel and audience members into different sides, and the disagreements have migrated to council. Some accuse Starr of constantly interrupting city staff while others, including Councilman Bert Perello, accuse the staff of being rude to Starr and not allowing him to ask questions.

On Monday, a utilities task force consisting of Flynn and Councilman Bryan MacDonald held a special one-hour meeting to weigh in. They couldn't agree, either.

Flynn thought having Osuna as facilitator was best but that the panel should decide whether to have a chairperson.

MacDonald, who said the city is on a stringent timeline to raise rates by July, didn't want the panel to get bogged down by an ancillary discussion.

"My fear is we decide, 'OK, appoint a chair,' and then we spend a whole meeting deciding who the chair is going to be," MacDonald said.

Ultimately, they decided to let the panel take 10 minutes to decide and select a chairman. At this rate, it seems nearly impossible that the panel will be unanimous in its suggestion of a new wastewater rate. The vote on whether to have a chairman was not unanimous, the vote on Littell to be chairman was not unanimous and the vote on Starr's motion about an infrastructure-use fee also was not unanimous. In a split vote,

the panel decided against advising council to rid an infrastructure fee charged to utility ratepayers.

La Nina weather pattern ends; 'La Nada' begins

USA TODAY

Ventura County Star 2/10/2017

A weak and short-lived La Nina was officially declared over by federal climate scientists Thursday.

La Nina, which is El Nino's colder counterpart, is a natural climate pattern marked by cooler-than-average water in the tropical Pacific Ocean. It can affect weather and climate in the U.S. and around the world.

"This La Nina wasn't exactly one for the record books," Climate Prediction Center scientist Emily Becker said. In fact, it was one of the weakest and shortest La Ninas on record, CPC chief Mike Halpert told the Associated Press.

"Even though it was fairly weak and short-lived ... it did leave impacts," Halpert said.

Ski areas in the Sierra Nevada mountains are recording one of their snowiest winters on record, and many of California's reservoirs are brimming with water. The prolonged drought in northern California was declared over last month.

The Climate Prediction Center said that neutral conditions, colloquially known as "La Nada," are now present and should persist through the summer.

Oroville dam releases further erode hole in damaged spillway

Integrity of dam is not affected from latest cascade of water.

By Bettina Boxall
LA Times 2/10/2017

As storm runoff poured into fast rising Lake Oroville Thursday, the state resumed releases down the reservoir's damaged spillway, creating dramatic scenes of muddy torrents gushing over the concrete chute.

The releases tore a larger hole in the spillway and jumped over the structure, creating an instant waterfall.

"These pictures are dramatic and they will continue to change and be dramatic," William Croyle, acting director of the state Department of Water Resources, said at an evening news briefing.

"As we upped the flows ... that's further eroding around the lower part of the spillway and the spillway itself. That's not a surprise to us," he added.

The spillway is separate from the dam, Croyle emphasized, adding that "none of this is affecting the integrity of the dam itself."

State officials stopped the spillway releases Tuesday after workers discovered a huge hole in the lower portion of the long concrete chute.

But with this week's storms dumping more runoff in the reservoir and pushing the lake closer to the level that would trigger releases down a separate emergency spillway, officials decided they had no choice but to use the eroded structure.

Thursday afternoon the reservoir level was 884 feet, 17 feet below the emergency release point of 901 feet. Croyle said managers hoped that if they could get more water out of the reservoir in coming hours they could keep the lake below the critical level.

But if that doesn't work, Croyle said it was possible water would start flowing over the unpaved emergency spillway sometime Saturday.

"It will be pretty amazing to see what happens," he said. "It will be a thin veneer of water flowing over the crest into ravines and into the river."

Crews were clearing trees and brush from the emergency pathway Thursday. The state also moved a couple of million fish out of the downstream Feather River Hatchery because water from the eroded spillway is too muddy for hatchery use.

Officials do not know what caused the collapse of a section of the spillway, gouging a hole that was 45 feet deep and 250 feet long. The cavity has since doubled in size.

The state's second largest reservoir, Oroville provides the main storage for the State Water Project that sends Northern California supplies to the Southland.

Verizon antennas anchored at yacht club

Westlake's wireless coverage will improve

By Sylvie Belmont



New wireless antennas to be installed at the Westlake Yacht Club are expected to boost cell coverage for hundreds of residents on the south side of Westlake Village.

The City Council recently approved a request by Verizon Wireless to install 12 antennas on top of the yacht club headquarters at 32123 Lindero Canyon Road. The antennas will be set inside the roof cupola and screened from public view.

In addition to the roof-mounted antennas, a ground generator will be installed in the landscaping on the south side of the yacht club.

The new equipment will enhance coverage for nine out of 10 neighborhoods in the surrounding area, city officials said.

The council voted unanimously to approve the project.

The size of the cupola will be expanded to accommodate the new equipment, but the height of the building will remain unchanged.

One resident urged officials to approve the project without delay.

“Currently, the reception is poor. I hope there are no controversies, but if there are, I hope you will find a way around them (and) you will make this happen,” the speaker said.

Verizon has one year to begin construction of the new antennas before the permit expires, said Scott Wolfe, planning director for Westlake Village.

Verizon is also installing a cell tower at the Three Springs water reservoir.

“This was originally authorized in 2010,” said Jeff Reinhardt of the Las Virgenes Municipal Water District, owner of the reservoir. “The City of Westlake Village has approved the installation and the architectural elements.”

Verizon is the last major carrier to install cell facilities at the reservoir. AT&T and T-Mobile have antennas at the site. The antennas are disguised to blend in with the surroundings.

Wolfe said officials are working to improve wireless coverage in the hard-to-reach areas of the city, such as Three Springs and Oak Forest.

Most of the cellular transmitters in the city are on buildings on Corsa Avenue north of the freeway, where the high vantage point is best.

Cell facilities can also be found at Lakeview and Agoura roads and at The Landing, Wolfe said, adding that a number of smaller towers have been approved at different locations throughout town.

Thoughts about Triunfo's grass

One might remind the petty, bothered residents near Triunfo Park that California is still in a serious drought. Selfish water use by individual homeowners should be reported.

The Conejo Rec and Park District is a leader in showing neighbors how to conserve. Too bad these ingrates can't learn by example.

Joseph Dodge
Westlake Village

As someone who lives close to Triunfo Park and visits on an almost daily basis, I have followed CRPD's turf-removal project at the park closely.

The park district's representatives say turf removal is necessary to comply with the statewide water conservation mandate and that 52 percent of all grass will ultimately need to be removed.

We all recognize that California has been in a severe drought and that water conservation is an important part in preparing for a "new normal," where drinking water may come at a premium.

However, removing turf from a park is a balancing act. Triunfo Park is a very popular park used by a large variety of groups that enjoy the green spaces for homeschooling, yoga, exercise, family reunions and the like.

CRPD appears to think the park is only used for baseball and targeted the park based on low baseball permit revenues. Comparing turf removal at other parks in the district highlights just how unbalanced the approach is at Triunfo Park, where the percentage of turf removed is roughly four times that of the average park.

To make matters worse, Triunfo Park will soon use 100 percent reclaimed water, so removing turf in the name of water conservation is highly disingenuous. CRPD is removing turf to save drinking water—from a park that uses no potable water.

It appears instead that CRPD has found a way to reduce future maintenance expenses at the park while being paid \$1 per square foot in the form of turf-removal grants from the Metropolitan Water District. Removing grass is apparently a pretty profitable business, whether it saves water or not.

Marcus Jonsson
Westlake Village

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06A28T

Despite wet weather, state extends drought measures

Californians have made progress in conserving water, statistics show

SCOTT SMITH ASSOCIATED PRESS
Ventura County Star 2/09/2017

FRESNO - Water regulators in California on Wednesday extended what are now largely symbolic conservation measures lingering from the drought after the state has seen one of the wettest winters in years.

Regulators decided to retain the measures at least until spring as a precaution against the possible return of dry weather — even as another major storm bears down on the state.

'I don't think there's just one way to go,' Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the State Water Resources Control Board, said after several local water districts urged members to lift the regulations. 'The better decision is to extend it and see later where we are.'

The regulations are largely symbolic because roughly 80 percent California water districts say they have ample supplies and aren't requiring residents to cut back on usage of water.

The regulations require water districts to make monthly reports on their water use and prohibit residents from wasting water, such as washing sidewalks with a hose and turning on sprinklers after it rains. Californians heeded the call to conserve water during the height of the five-year drought. But opponents of the regulations say weather has dramatically changed.

'Here in San Diego County, we are not experiencing drought conditions. Many areas of the state are not,' said Dana Friehauf, water resources manager of the San Diego County Water Authority, which has invested millions of dollars in desalination and water efficiency.

'We're going to continue to encourage people to use water efficiently,' she said. 'We don't need the drought emergency regulations in place to have folks do that.' Joone Lopez, general manager of the Moulton Niguel Water District in Orange County, encouraged the state to leave the regulations in place. 'People recognize this historic drought was years in the making,' Lopez said.

'Two months of rain isn't going to get us out.'

State residents used roughly 20 percent less water in December compared to the same time in 2013, the year before the drought emergency was declared, officials reported during the board meeting.

Enough water has been saved since mandatory conservation began in June 2015 to serve nearly one-third of the state's population for a year. In January, storms drenched the state and filled some reservoirs. The Sierra Nevada snowpack, which provides much of the state's water as it melts in the spring, recently measured at 182

percent of normal. The rain total in downtown Los Angeles since October — the start of the wet season — has reached 15 ½ inches — far exceeding the normal annual rainfall. It's unclear whether Gov. Jerry Brown might lift the state's drought emergency.

OXNARD COUNCIL APPROVES WATER RATE INCREASE

Average household due to see bills rise 7 percent

WENDY LEUNG

Ventura County Star 2/09/2017

In 2016, wastewater rates were the dominant issue in Oxnard.

This year, wastewater rates are still front and center, but water rates are vying for attention.

The city's water fund ran a \$7 million deficit in the past fiscal year, and according to Chief Finance Officer Jim Throop, this year is no different.

"The water fund only had \$8 million in unrestricted cash, and if it finishes this year with another \$7 million deficit, we'll have \$1 million in unrestricted cash," Throop said.

With the prospect of having just \$1 million left in rainy day funds, the Oxnard City Council on Tuesday unanimously approved a rate hike that would equate to a 7 percent, or \$3.62, increase for the average household.

The increase is known as a "pass through," meaning the city is passing on the increase it receives from Calleguas Municipal Water and United Water Conservation districts.

The city's water supply consists primarily of local groundwater combined with imported water from Calleguas and United.

Throop said the city has not passed through the increases of Calleguas and United since 2013 and 2014.

Unlike a typical utility rate increase, this "pass through" increase does not require a process of notifying residents and businesses and allowing them an opportunity to protest. The "pass through" increase doesn't even require a council vote, although City Manager Greg Nyhoff said he thought it was appropriate to open it for discussion. The new rate increase will take effect March 15. The "pass through" increase is expected to raise the annual revenue by \$3.1 million.

It won't be the last time residents will see their water bills go up this year. The city is about to start a new rate-setting process that will lead to higher water rates in August. The city is in that process now for wastewater rates.

That the water fund is quickly running out of cash isn't news to city staff members. Proposals for a rate hike were before the council twice last year.

Last January, the council majority voted against a water rate hike citing the need to better explain the city's financial predicament to the public. Mayor Tim Flynn and Councilmen Bert Perello and Bryan Mac-Donald were against the increase. The item came before the council again in July but was voted down by the same three. Flynn said he wanted to go on a public relations campaign to explain to residents the need to raise water rates.

Drought restrictions to remain

Despite record rainfall, state water board extends emergency rules



WORKERS inspect erosion from heavy rain runoff at Lake Oroville's spillway, where water is released when the Northern California reservoir nears capacity. (Randy Pench Associated Press)

By Joseph Serna and Bettina Boxall
LA Times 2/09/2017

California's snowpack is at 184% of average for this time of year. Cities from San Francisco to Los Angeles have recorded their highest rain levels in years. Rockslides and flooding hit Northern California.

And the spillway of the state's massive dam at Lake Oroville, once a symbol of the state's brutal drought when it sat nearly empty, is actually eroding because of so much runoff from fall and winter rains.

Despite all this, the State Water Resources Control Board on Wednesday held firm in the face of opposition and extended the state's emergency drought regulations, pledging to revisit them in May, when the state's traditional rainy season has ended.

“We’re certainly well-situated compared to previous years, but we’ve learned things can change suddenly. Warm rain or higher temperatures can quickly degrade snowpack,” said board Chairwoman Felicia Marcus.

As it did last May, the board found on Wednesday that it was still too early to lift emergency rules that limit urban water use and mandate that municipal water agencies provide monthly reports on their water reserves, supply and demand.

“Many parts of the state are still in pain, but a lot fewer,” Marcus said.

The board decided last spring that local water districts were allowed to set their own savings targets based on water supply and demand forecasts tailored to their areas.

That means that places that received a lot of rain — and communities that purchase or are entitled to water from sources there — see fewer restrictions, while dry areas without water from those replenished supplies are still under conservation requirements.

Much of Northern California is out of drought thanks to one of the wettest seasons on record. Southern California has also seen record rainfall, but parts of the Central Coast and Central Valley remain in drought.

Groundwater shortages remain in many areas, including the southern Central Valley.

Board members said it was most prudent to wait until the rainy season ends and assess the conditions statewide before making changes in regulations.

“Water conservation is a way of California from now on,” said board member Steven Moore.

But that doesn’t sit well with everyone.

Paul Helliker, general manager for the Humboldt Bay Municipal Water District, among the rainiest areas of the state, said that his agency has enough water stored to last another five years of drought and that monthly reporting is unnecessary. Other critics argued that water conservation can be handled on the local level.

State officials believe their process results in better conservation.

Since the emergency regulations were put in place, the state water board has seen greater compliance with agencies reporting their annual water use and customers adhering to conservation rules, Moore countered. Though the drought regulations may be nearing the end of their shelf life, the culture that made them such a success has to remain, he said.

The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which sought an end to the regulations, agreed with Moore's statement.

"While the emergency has ended, the need to conserve has not," district General Manager Jeffrey Kightlinger said in a statement. "Southern Californians have learned a lot about water conservation during the latest drought. We cannot afford to forget those lessons."

Back in Oroville, state engineers spent Wednesday trying to figure out how much water they could send down the dam's damaged spillway.

The state planned to make test releases, knowing the flows probably will enlarge the 30-foot-deep hole in the concrete spillway of California's second-largest reservoir.

Workers discovered the erosion a day earlier and stopped the high releases the state was making from the reservoir to maintain required space for runoff from an upcoming weekend storm.

To partially counter the spillway shutdown, they increased releases through Oroville's power plant on Wednesday. But there is a limit to that tactic.

That leaves the state with a difficult choice: keep sending water down the spillway, which will worsen the damage, or let the reservoir fill, which would send flows gushing down a separate emergency spillway that is not paved or gated.

Department of Water Resources officials want to avoid doing that if possible, but as a precaution, workers are clearing trees and debris from downstream areas. Engineers also are looking for ways to bolster the spillway.

"The dam is sound, and no imminent threat to the public exists," the department emphasized in a news release.

Oroville is the key reservoir in the State Water Project, which sends Northern California supplies to the urban Southland.

The recent parade of storms that have pounded Northern California filled reservoirs to above-average levels for this time of year, forcing managers to ramp up releases to make room for more inflow.

After the state halted spillway releases Tuesday, so much runoff continued to flow into the reservoir that Oroville went from 80% full to 84% overnight.

"At this point, they have to be prepared to use the broken spillway," said Ron Stork, who has studied Oroville operations as a policy staffer for Friends of the River, an

environmental group. “If they don’t, the reservoir is going to rise, and there is no place to put a big inflow.”

Typically, reservoir releases are made through Oroville’s power plant, and the spillway is used only for high releases. The last time managers opened the spillway valves was in 2011.



ALLEN J. SCHAEKEL LOS ANGELES TIMES

LAKE OROVILLE must release water to maintain space for runoff from an upcoming storm. The reservoir once sat nearly empty from the state’s drought.

SURROUNDINGS

Rains bring promise of spectacular desert flowers



'We're seeing lots of germination,' but conditions could still change, botanist says.

DESERT DANDELIONS, above, sand verbena, desert sunflowers and spectacle pod (sporting white or lavender blooms) are some of the most common flowers that could appear at Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. (K.C. Alfred San Diego Union-Tribune)

J. HARRY JONES

LA Times 2/08/2017

SAN DIEGO — The strongest winter rainfall totals in roughly a decade have botanists and state park officials anticipating the spring wildflower season in Borrego Springs.

If all goes well, the region could yield a spectacular bloom not seen since 1997 and 1998, banner years still talked about in the tiny desert community.

"People say it was like magic in the 1990s," said Linda Haddock, the executive director of the Borrego Springs Chamber of Commerce — who hasn't seen a really good wildflower bloom since she moved to the desert almost a decade ago.

“They said the valley was all purple. It was the reason people moved here back then,” she said.

Jim Dice, a botanist and the manager of the Steele-Burnand Anza-Borrego Research Center at UC Irvine, said he thinks the bloom is going to be good everywhere this year.

“We’re seeing lots of germination right now,” he said.

Sand verbena — the delicate purple flower referenced by Haddock — as well as desert sunflowers, desert dandelions and spectacle pod (white or lavender blooms) are some of the most common flowers that could appear.

But Dice and Dennis Stephen, the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park’s official interpreter, said the weather over the next month still could affect the spring bloom. If it gets hot and no more rain falls, a lot of what has germinated might not emerge.

“We have had some good rainfall, and the western edges of the park are looking good. But we’re always cautious with our predictions because things could change,” Stephen said. “If it gets too hot, that could parch the seedlings. But we do have good germination right now.”

The rain also can affect when the wildflower season starts and how long it might last.

“If this is all we get, then I think [the bloom] will start in mid- to late February,” Dice said. “But if it continues to rain, it might hold off a little bit and go longer.”

Perhaps the best way for people to find out what is happening on the desert floor is to call the park’s Wildflower Hotline, which is frequently updated.

Haddock said once the word gets out that a great bloom is upon the desert, people will flock to the area. Up to an estimated 1.5 million people visit the park annually.

“People need to be prepared,” Haddock said. “When they hear the news, the cheer ... get out here.”

Water rules at issue as drought recedes

With many reservoirs brimming, state will decide today whether to extend emergency conservation policies.

By Joseph Serna
LA Times 2/08/2017

The “atmospheric river” returned with a vengeance Tuesday to Northern California, where snow piled up in the Sierra Nevada and coastal riverbanks were overwhelmed, flooding rural towns.

It’s at least the third major storm series to hit the region since the beginning of the year, building Sierra Nevada snowpack to heights not seen in years. Many of the state’s reservoirs are brimming and the earth around them is beginning to soak in the moisture.

The rain has ended the drought in much of Northern California, but it leaves state water officials with a dilemma.

California’s top water cops will decide Wednesday whether to extend the state’s emergency drought rules.

The staff of the State Water Resources Control Board has recommended against nixing the regulations, which have been in effect since June 2015 and would expire Feb. 28.

If the five-person board agrees, urban water districts up and down the state would have to continue monthly reports on consumption, as well as “stress tests” to certify they have enough inventory to withstand three straight years of drought conditions .

The regulations would be extended for 270 days if approved at Wednesday’s meeting of the water board in Sacramento.

That meeting will occur amid conditions that are far from drought-like.

The latest Northern California storm system centered on the Bay Area but was widespread, dropping more than 7 inches of rain in Sonoma County to the north and 6 inches of rain in Santa Cruz County to the south and overwhelming coastal cities in between, according to the National Weather Service.

Flood warnings were issued for multiple counties in Northern California on Tuesday, with agencies expecting the Russian and Sacramento rivers to overflow their banks as the rain and melting snow flow down the mountains.

U.S. 101 was flooded in Novato, a tree limb fell on a house in Monterey, and a mudslide left a vehicle upside down in Santa Cruz County, the weather service said.

The San Benito County Sheriff's Office issued a voluntary evacuation order for residents near Pacheco Creek after the creek flooded Tuesday morning. The area flooded last month during a previous trio of storms.

Atmospheric rivers — warm weather systems that flow east from Hawaii and the western Pacific — carry huge amounts of moisture and provide the majority of California's water, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The state has missed out on many of them in recent years, but not this last fall or current winter. California is on pace for one of its wettest years on record and has seen its drought outlook dramatically improve since October.

The biggest deficit remains in Southern California, where it rains more infrequently and the watershed system isn't as vast for local reservoirs.

This week's storms brought gusty winds and dropped more than 2 inches of rain in San Luis Obispo and Ventura counties and lesser amounts in Los Angeles County, the weather service reported. There is less runoff from rain in the Southland because the soil has to recover more moisture after years of drought, climatologists say.

Another storm that hits San Luis Obispo County late Thursday should begin raining on Ventura and Los Angeles counties by Friday and could drop up to an inch and a half of rain, the weather service said.

Friday's storm is colder and is flowing in from the Gulf of Alaska, the weather service said.

Clear skies and warmer temperatures are expected over the weekend.

Joshua Emerson Smith of the San Diego Union-Tribune contributed to this report.

Water authority mismanaged millions, auditors say

By Paloma Esquivel

LA Times 2/08/2017

A wastewater treatment authority that serves large parts of the high desert, including Victorville, Hesperia and Apple Valley, mismanaged millions of dollars in federal emergency management funds, a U.S. audit has found.

The Victor Valley Water Reclamation Authority, which received the funds after major flooding six years ago led to a ruptured pipeline, did not comply with numerous federal regulations on Federal Emergency Management Agency contracts worth \$31.7 million, according to the report by the Office of Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security.

The audit calls on FEMA and California to disallow the \$31.7 million in what it deemed “ineligible costs” and said further investigation was needed to determine “whether additional regulatory and ethical violations or gross mismanagement occurred.”

The inspector general’s office also found that the authority and one of its main contractors misled FEMA to fund more expensive repairs than necessary. That resulted in millions in federal funds awarded to the agency, the report says.

The office promised to present findings on that issue in another report.

David Wylie, a spokesman for the water reclamation authority, said that officials were “disappointed” by the report and that the agency had “responded in detail to the concerns raised by” the inspector general.

The authority has previously undergone “a lengthy audit process and [provided] substantial legal authority and documentation as to why VVWRA believes that the findings” are incorrect, Wylie said.

According to the current audit, the authority repeatedly accepted, without verification, contractors’ own assessments of costs and need for funds. One contractor’s numerous modifications led the original price of its contract to triple from about \$410,000 to \$1.3 million, the report says.

The authority also failed to properly follow policy for how contractors should be selected, analyze bids to ensure reasonable costs and impose price ceilings on contractors.

Because the agency did not follow numerous rules meant to ensure that federal grant money is used properly, “FEMA has no assurance that these costs were reasonable,” the report says.

The money was awarded to the authority to repair a pipeline that was washed out by the Mojave River in major floods in late 2010. The rupture sent 42 million gallons of sewage spilling into the river, officials said.

The pipeline project was completed last year.

California briefs

Group calls for end to drought restrictions

FRESNO, Calif. - A coalition of state and local leaders is pressing California to lift restrictions on urban water use after the wettest winter for years. Water regulators in Sacramento on Wednesday will decide on a recommendation to extend the drought rules, uncertain if rain and snow will continue through spring.

Republican State Sen. Jim Nielsen of Gerber, who leads a swelling coalition of law makers and local water districts statewide, says it's time for Gov. Jerry Brown to end the drought emergency, or lose the public's trust. Californians heeded the call during the historic drought, taking shorter showers and ripping out their lawns during the five-year drought, but the weather has dramatically changed, which everybody can see, Nielsen says in a letter to the governor also signed by other officials.

Ventura County Star 2/08/2017

Storms continue to bring much-welcomed rain, snow

After a long drought, the bulk of the state is on pace for its wettest year on record.



CROSSING GUARD Maria Brito, left, escorts her pedestrians at Ford Boulevard and Verona Street in East Los Angeles during a morning rainstorm. (Photographs by Mark Boster Los Angeles Times) A MAN makes his way through the rain in Chinatown. Southern California's precipitation was only a sprinkling compared with what the Bay Area got.

By Joseph Serna
LA Times 2/07/2017

They didn't pack the punch of the atmospheric rivers that swept across California in January.

But the first of two storms that arrived before sunrise Monday dropped much-welcomed rain and snow from the Sacramento Valley and Sierra Nevada down to San Diego County.

After years of sustained drought, California's landscape has been inundated with storm after storm since the beginning of the water year in October.

The Sierra Nevada snowpack — which when it melts provides a third of the state's water — is 173% above average, and the range's foothills are saturated with water.

The bulk of the state is on pace for its wettest year on record and reservoirs are at or above historical averages for this time of year.

“It’s a very beneficial type of rain. With any luck it doesn’t get any heavier,” said National Weather Service meteorologist Dave Bruno.

Foothill residents along the northern Sierra Nevada and the San Gabriel Mountains in Los Angeles County were warned Monday that mud and debris flows were possible in the short term.

The city of Duarte issued a yellow alert Sunday night for residents in the impact area around last year’s Fish fire, limiting where residents could park their vehicles and place their trash cans.

The National Weather Service issued a flood advisory for Ventura County through Monday morning that cautioned that water could accumulate on roads, highways and other low-lying areas.

But Southern California’s rain was only a sprinkling of what the Bay Area and beyond experienced, said Steve Anderson, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

The storm that soaked the Southland was expected to drop up to 2 inches of rain around downtown San Francisco and up to 5 inches in the coastal hills of Central and Northern California by Tuesday afternoon, Anderson said.

Though the storm is a warm “atmospheric river,” meaning it flows east from warm waters in the Pacific and brings more rain than snow, it is still expected to add up to 3 feet to the Sierra snowpack, Anderson said.

The storm is expected to stretch across most of the state and could trigger floods in streams and rivers up north, the weather service said.

The storm, followed by another one Thursday and Friday, could overwhelm the Sacramento River in some areas and cause flooding in Susanville, according to the California Nevada River Forecast Center.

A winter storm warning was issued for the northern Sierra Nevada, where wind gusts of up to 120 mph could occur, the weather service warned. Mountain passes could be snowed out, and drivers were urged to bring chains.

According to the latest U.S. Drought Report, this winter’s rains have alleviated dry conditions for most of Northern California and made a significant dent in the state’s southern half.

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