

Average snowpack could prolong California water conservation (Update)

March 30 2016, by Rich Pedroncelli And Scott Smith



Frank Gehrke, chief of the California Cooperative Snow Surveys Program for the Department of Water Resources, checks the weight of the snowpack, on a scale held by Dan Brumbaugh, right, as he performs the snow survey at Phillips Station, Wednesday, March 30, 2016, in Echo Summit, Calif. The survey showed the snowpack at about 95 percent of normal for this site at this time of year. Brumbaugh, John Thompson, second from left, and Sarah Carvill, third from left, are Policy Fellows from the California Council on Science and Technology. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

A nearly average spring snowpack in the Sierra Nevada will likely prolong tough water conservation measures in drought-stricken California—although the restrictions could be loosened in some areas after an El Nino storm system drenched the northern half of the state this winter, officials said Wednesday.

"The message is still very strong: Conservation measures are still going to be important," Frank Gehrke, chief of the California Cooperative Snow Survey Program, said after he trudged through the snow to manually measure the snowpack at nearly 95 percent of normal.

A year ago, Gov. Jerry Brown stood on the same spot—then a dusty patch of ground with no snow—to announce that the dire drought required residents to cut back water use by 25 percent.

Californians are now under orders to use at least 20 percent less water. To comply, many have let lawns turn brown, flushed toilets less often and taken other measures aimed at saving water.

Northern California has seen the most rain and snow this winter, lifting its three largest reservoirs to above-normal levels. Southern California, meanwhile, saw relatively little precipitation leaving most of its reservoirs low and threatening to further deplete dwindling groundwater.

George Kostyrko of the State Water Board said officials will consider the difference in those regions while setting new conservation targets in the months ahead.



In this March 1, 2016 file photo, Frank Gehrke, chief of the California Cooperative Snow Surveys Program for the Department of Water Resources, checks the depth of the snowpack at Phillips Station near Echo Summit, Calif. State surveyors will trudge through several feet of snow Wednesday, March 30, 2016, to manually measure what could be close to a normal Sierra Nevada snowpack for this time of year. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli, File)

The snowpack in California—now in its fifth year of drought—is typically at its deepest on April 1 before the snow melts in the warm months, rushing down streams and rivers into lakes and reservoirs.

The melted snow provides roughly one-third of the water consumed by thirsty cities and farms in the nation's leading agricultural and most populous state.

San Joaquin Valley farmer Shawn Stevenson said the nearly average snowpack provided a bit of encouragement after five tough years forced him to cut back his farming operation by nearly half.

"It's certainly not the kind of news where we can breathe a sigh of relief and think the drought's over," Stevenson said. "It's going to take a number of years to recover."



In this April 1, 2015, file photo, Frank Gehrke, chief of the California Cooperative Snow Surveys Program for the Department of Water Resources, left, and Gov. Jerry Brown walk across a dry meadow as Gehrke conducts the snow survey, near Echo Summit, Calif. A year later, state drought surveyors will trudge through deep snow Wednesday, March 30, 2016, to measure what could be close to a normal Sierra Nevada snowpack for this time of year. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli, File)

Strong El Nino storms in early March led some water districts to question whether a drought emergency still existed and if residents should still be required to live under conservation orders.

Leaders of local water districts say the state needs to save the emergency declaration for the true emergencies, fearing they will lose credibility with the public the next time drought hits and they are asked to conserve.

"I think there is a strong case to be made that portions of the state are not in emergency conditions anymore," said Deven Upadhyay of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which provides water to about 19 million residents. "I do think that needs to be considered."

Tracy Quinn, a senior policy analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council, said the state should keep some conservation mandates in place in the south and make other measures permanent.

"It's important to remember we've had several years of exceptionally hot and dry weather and it's going to be a long road to recovery," Quinn said. "We don't know what the next year and several years will bring."

Conservation measures have changed the way many Californians use water—for the good, said Jean Ryan, who works at a plant nursery in the Northern California town of Sonoma. She said many customers have torn out thirsty lawns for low-water alternatives.

"We sell so much more of these than we did before," Ryan said, gesturing at tables of succulents and cacti. "I don't think people are going to go back to putting lawns in."

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