

California snowpack surveyed as indicator of drought

January 3 2017, by Scott Smith

Surveyors will plunge poles into the Sierra Nevada snowpack near Lake Tahoe on Tuesday, taking the season's first measurement by hand of the snow's water content as California flirts with a sixth year of drought.

What they find in the snowpack between now and April 1 will guide state water managers in the nation's most populous state that also leads in production of farming.

Electronic monitors in late December showed the snowpack's [water content](#) at just 72 percent of normal despite heavy rain. That figure dipped even lower during the holiday weekend.

The snowpack is vital because it provides roughly a third of California's water by melting in warm, dry months, providing water for drinking, farming and wildlife.

At the height of drought in 2015, surveyors stood on a dirt patch for the April 1 measurement at Phillips Station, finding the least snow since records had been taken in 1950.

Gov. Jerry Brown responded by ordering residents statewide to use 25 percent less water, letting lawns turn brown—or tearing them out—and flushing toilets less often.

The drought eased last year, and so did regulators. The State Water Resources Control Board in February will again consider the conditions,

deciding whether the state needs to take a stronger role.

"If the skies dry up, we'll be looking at something different," board chair Felicia Marcus said. "We're playing this one moment to moment."

This wet season started strong. More rain fell in October than in three decades, raising the state's major reservoirs in Northern California and hopes that the drought will soon end.

Doug Carlson, a spokesman for the state's Department of Water Resources, said it is too early to predict. "It could change immediately and stop snowing and raining," Carlson cautioned.

Five straight years of drought depleted groundwater supplies. Some residents with dry wells mostly in Tulare County continue to live on bottled water—a sign that [drought](#) persists.

San Joaquin Valley citrus farmer Brian Neufeld is hopeful. Looking east from his home, he sees the snowcapped Sierra peaks—a welcomed sight missing for several years.

"We get more snowpack, and we have more [water](#) available when we need it later in the season," Neufeld said. "I couldn't be happier about it. I wish it would rain more."

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