

California drought eases due to storms dumping snow and rain

February 2 2017, by Ellen Knickmeyer And Rich Pedroncelli



In this Jan. 3, 2017, file photo, Frank Gehrke, chief of the California Cooperative Snow Surveys Program for the Department of Water Resources, plunges the survey tube into the snowpack as he conducts the first snow survey of the season at Phillips Station near Echo Summit, Calif. Nothing but good news is expected when California does its next regular Sierra snow surveys after last month's huge storms. The state snow survey on Thursday, Feb. 2, 2017, is important because California gets about a third of its water from Sierra runoff in typical years. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli, File)

Roaring storms that brought California almost a year's worth of snow and rain in a single month should make state water managers' Sierra snowpack survey Thursday a celebration, marking this winter's dramatic retreat of the state's more than 5-year-drought, water experts say.

Typically, snowfall in the Sierra Nevada mountains during winter storms provide a third of the state's water through the year, as the drifts melt. In January, back-to-back-to-back storms from the tropics that each dropped a hurricane's worth of water on the state have put the state at 108 percent of its normal rain and snow for the year, with two months still left in the rainy season, said Michael Dettinger, a hydrologist for the U.S. Geological Survey.

California had received just one-fourth of a normal year's precipitation when January started, he said. The storm systems, known as atmospheric rivers, "caught us all off guard, how many came in so quickly, and turned everything around," Dettinger said.

January's storms lifted the northern half of the state out of drought. This time last year, 95 percent of California was in drought, after the driest three-year stretch in the state's history.

In April of 2014, Gov. Jerry Brown stood in a Sierra meadow bare of its usual snow to declare a drought emergency in California, and ordered mandatory water conservation in cities and towns. Surveyors with the state Department of Water Resources will return to the meadows Thursday with rods to measure the depth of the snowpack so far this winter.

State water officials, who lifted the statewide conservation mandate as the drought eased, say Brown's administration likely will wait for a final seasonal snow survey in April before deciding whether to officially end the state drought emergency.

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