

California expands drought emergency to large swath of state

May 11 2021, by Don Thompson



In this April 21, 2021, file photo, California Gov. Gavin Newsom holds a news conference in the parched basin of Lake Mendocino in Ukiah, Calif., where he announced he would proclaim a drought emergency for Mendocino and Sonoma counties. Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday, May 10, 2021, declared a drought emergency for most of California, extending a previous order that affected two counties to 41 counties throughout much of the state. (Kent Porter/The Press Democrat via AP, File)

California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday expanded a drought emergency to a large swath of the nation's most populous state while seeking more than \$6 billion in multiyear water spending as one of the warmest, driest springs on record threatens another severe wildfire season across the American West.

The Democratic governor said he is acting amid "acute [water](#) supply shortages" in northern and central parts of California as he called again for voluntary conservation. Yet the state is in relatively better shape than it was when the last five-year drought ended in 2017, he said, as good habits have led to a 16% reduction in [water usage](#).

His emergency declaration now includes 41 of 58 counties, covering 30% of California's nearly 40 million people, and he said a further expansion is likely as conditions worsen. The U.S. Drought Monitor shows most of the state and the American West is in extensive drought just a few years after California emerged from the last punishing multiyear dry spell.

"We're staring down at what could be disastrous summer and fall, with the potential of communities running out water, and fires," said Democratic U.S. Rep. Jim Costa, who accompanied Newsom to the announcement made before a Central Valley reservoir with a deep bathtub ring of dry earth surrounded by browning grass.

Like most of the state's extensive interconnected system of reservoirs and canals, the San Luis Reservoir is at less than 60% of its seasonal average as scarce winter rain and snow turns to a dry summer that Newsom said is imperiled by climate change.



In this March 5, 2020, file photo, Hunter Maltz, a fish technician for the Yurok tribe, pushes a jet boat into the low water of the Klamath River at the confluence of the Klamath River and Blue Creek as Keith Parker, as a Yurok tribal fisheries biologist, watches near Klamath, Calif., in Humboldt County. California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday, May 10, 2021, declared a drought emergency for most of California, extending a previous order that affected two counties to 41 counties throughout much of the state. (AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus, File)

Officials fear an extraordinarily dry spring presages a wildfire season like last year, when flames burned a record 6,562 square miles (16,996 square kilometers).

"The hots are getting a lot hotter in this state, the dries are getting a lot drier," Newsom said. "We have a conveyance system, a water system,

that was designed for a world that no longer exists."

That requires the state to envision "a much more resilient, a much more vibrant, much more dynamic water delivery system," he said, noting that the one largely constructed in the last mid-century to carry water from Northern California to the south, "helped us build the world's largest middle class" by enabling the state's population and agricultural growth.

The governor is asking state lawmakers to approve what he said is a record \$5.1 billion over four years for [water projects](#), plus another \$1 billion to help an estimated million Californians who are behind on their water bills in part because of the economic hardship of the pandemic.

His proposed water spending includes \$1.3 billion for drinking water and wastewater systems, prioritizing smaller and poorer communities.



In this March 2, 2020, file photo, farmer Ben DuVal with his wife, Erika, and their daughters, Hannah, third from left, and Helena, fourth from left, stand near a canal for collecting run-off water near their property in Tulelake, Calif. Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday, May 10, 2021, declared a drought emergency for most of California, extending a previous order that affected two counties to 41 counties throughout much of the state. (AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus, File)

Another \$200 million would go to repair canals damaged when the ground beneath them sank as more groundwater was pulled from wells.

Other projects would address groundwater cleanup, water recycling, fish and wildlife habitat, flood preparedness, weather forecasting, and agricultural water use.

His expanded drought emergency declaration includes the counties in the Klamath River, Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and Tulare Lake watersheds across much of the northern and central parts of the state.

The Sierra Nevada snowpack, which provides about a third of the state's water, was at just 59% of average on April 1, when it is normally at its peak.

This year is unique because of extraordinarily warm temperatures in April and early May, Newsom said. That led to quick melting of the Sierra Nevada snowpack in the waterways that feed the Sacramento River, which in turn supplies much of the state's summer water supply.



In this Jan. 23, 2021, file photo, heavy clouds move over Los Angeles city skyline. California's hopes for a wet "March miracle" did not materialize and a dousing of April 2021 showers may as well be a mirage at this point. California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday, May 10, 2021, declared a drought emergency for most of California, extending a previous order that affected two counties to 41 counties throughout much of the state. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes, File)

The problem was worse because much of the snow seeped into the ground instead of flowing into rivers and reservoirs, he said.

The warmer temperatures also caused water users to draw more water more quickly than even in other drought years, he said, leaving reservoirs extremely low for farmers, fish and wildlife that depend on them.

That all reduced the state's water supplies by as much as what would

supply up to 1 million households for a year, he said.

Newsom urged residents to limit their use, whether by limiting outdoor watering, checking for leaks, or taking shorter showers and turning off the water when washing dishes or brushing teeth.

Senate Republicans blamed majority Democrats for not building more dams to increase water storage, with GOP leader Scott Wilk saying in a statement that the governor's declaration "does nothing to remove regulatory roadblocks that hold up shovel-ready water projects."



In this May 6, 2015, file photo, professional spa remover Juan Alexander empties a spa for permanent removal at a residence in which the owner considered it "a waste of water," in Garden Grove, Calif. Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday, May 10, 2021, declared a drought emergency for most of

California, extending a previous order that affected two counties to 41 counties throughout much of the state. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes, File)

Newsom is spending the week previewing highlights of the revised budget he will present to state lawmakers Friday for the fiscal year that begins July 1.

Earlier Monday in the San Francisco Bay Area, Newsom proposed tax rebates of up to \$1,100 for millions of lower- and middle-income Californians, one leg of a pandemic recovery plan made possible by an eye-popping \$76 billion budget surplus.

The barnstorming comes as Newsom faces a fall recall election driven in large part by frustration over his handling of the pandemic, though he noted that he also previewed his budget proposals in the past when he wasn't facing a recall.

"This expanded #drought declaration should have happened weeks ago," tweeted former Congressman Doug Ose, one of the Republicans who wants to replace Newsom. "Playing politics like this with people's livelihoods doesn't do anybody any good."

The governor's fellow Democrats, who control the Legislature, have until June 15 to pass a spending plan.

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