

WATER SHORTAGE

SAN LORENZO AT LOWEST RECORDED JANUARY LEVEL



The San Lorenzo River flows through downtown Santa Cruz on Thursday at a level usually reserved for the dry summer months.

SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Wildlife venturing closer to populated areas looking for water

By JASON HOPPIN

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SANTA CRUZ — One sign that something is going enormously awry are the coyotes in Paradise Park.

The riverside hamlet is home to all manner of wildlife, but coyotes are an infrequent guest. Yet with no winter to speak of — the U.S. Drought Monitor this week declared the entire Central Coast under an extreme drought — the coyotes have been improvising.

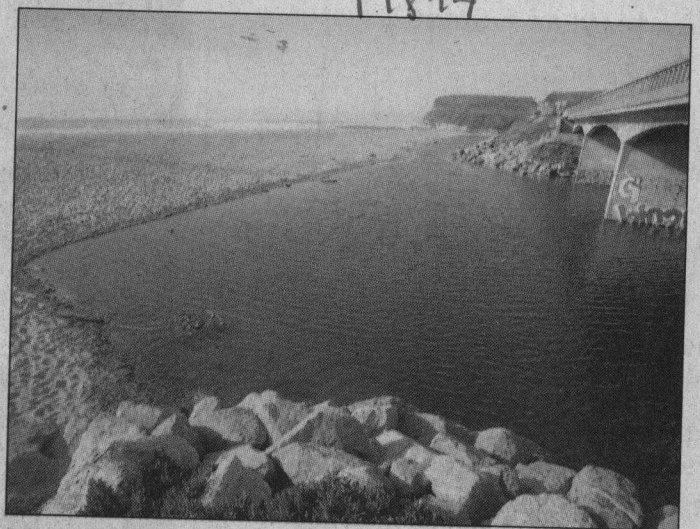
"It's so dry up in the hills, they come down looking for water," said Mark Hasey of Paradise Park, where this time of year usually brings big rains and the threat of floods. "Last year, we had a big flood the day

before Christmas Eve, a lot of our people had to (evacuate). This year, nothing."

But the San Lorenzo River isn't much relief. Usually a winter menace, the backbone of the county's second-largest watershed is at its lowest January level since U.S. Geological Measurement measurements began 77 years ago, and lower even than famous drought years of 1991 and 1977.

The San Lorenzo is not alone. The Sacramento, Trinity, Russian, San Joaquin, Eel and north fork of the American rivers have all set January records, while the Yuba, Tuolumne, Merced and more have approached and, absent sudden rains, still could

SEE RIVER ON A5



PATRICK TEHAN/BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

A sandbar on Scott Creek north of Davenport is apparently preventing coho from getting to the top spawning ground south of the Golden Gate. The ongoing drought is affecting sensitive populations of Chinook and coho salmon. In Santa Cruz, there are reports that endangered coho salmon are trapped in the lagoon of the San Lorenzo River, and fishermen are catching them.

RIVER

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surpass them.

Friday, Gov. Jerry Brown declared a statewide drought following weeks of pressure, including from Assemblyman Luis Alejo, D-Watsonville. Brown asked residents to cut water use 20 percent and the declaration makes water transfers between agencies easier, but what the county needs is rain, and on that front politicians can offer little more than prayer.

SEVERE PROBLEM

Brown's action came a day after the U.S. Drought Manager downgraded drought conditions on the Central Coast to "severe," and said many of the conditions for the most serious designation — "exceptional" — are already in place. Those designations forecast major crop losses and severe water restrictions.

The problem is being driven by a massive high pressure cell off the West Coast steering storms north before dumping them onto the Midwest. Snowpack in California is less than 20 percent of normal, fire officials have issued red flag warnings across large parts of the state, and no relief is in sight — a three-month National Weather Service forecast predicts warmer and drier weather than normal.

Farmers praised Brown's drought declaration, with Tom Nassif, president and CEO of the industry group Western Growers Association, calling on state and

federal officials to convey even moderate rainfall from the Delta south and "to operate at the highest end of their discretion within the existing rules limiting water exports to protect fish species" — a statement that underscores the competition between farmers and fish.

Local resource managers have been tightly focused on the water problem, particularly in Santa Cruz where residents depend on the San Lorenzo as a primary source of drinking water.

"These kind of conditions are unprecedented. We don't even have these in our modeling," said Chris Berry, a watershed compliance manager with the city of Santa Cruz.

NATURAL DILEMMA

The lack of rainfall is taxing Loch Lomond, a 9,200-acre-foot reservoir meant to help get the city through dry summer months. To maintain stream flows, the city is spilling more water into the San Lorenzo River tributary of Newell Creek than is coming in, and Loch Lomond is 15 feet lower than at this time last year.

In places where rivers are shoaled up by sandbars, dry weather is also placing state fishery managers on the horns of dilemma. At Scott Creek, officials haven't breached the river to let endangered Coho salmon in, instead protecting the hundreds of lagoon smolts waiting for a path to sea that could be jeopardized by a sudden rush of water.

"There's 1,000 fish that are ready to head out, but they're stuck," said

John Ricker, county water resources division director.

That has led to another anomaly as strange as coyotes in Paradise Park — fish swimming up the wrong river. Berry said he's seen photographic evidence that Coho, presumably shut out of Scott Creek, are making their way into the San Lorenzo River.

Throughout the county, residents and businesses divert water from overtaxed streams, a water source protected by strict state water rights laws. Ricker said the county would begin talking to some of those users about cutting their water use.

"It does help focus people's attention to really try to do something," Ricker said.

It is not completely bleak. Soquel Creek hasn't dried up as it did in the early 1990s, and no one has talked about a building moratorium, which was effectively put in place in the early 1980s when the Soquel Creek Water District implemented a ban on new water hookups.

But several water districts, including Soquel Creek, the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency and Santa Cruz Water Department, have tightened water restrictions. Toby Goddard, Santa Cruz' water conservation manager, said they'll likely be in place through winter.

"We're looking at something we've never seen before," Goddard said, estimating at least 2 feet of rain is needed to replenish the watershed.