

Coping with the drought

By MARK BERGSTROM

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MONTEREY — San Luis Obispo's water conservation efforts misfired when residents there thought odd/even watering meant they were supposed to water their yards every other day. Water use went up 30 percent.

Customers of the North Marin water company are being paid \$50 for each 100 square feet of lawn they rip out and replace with drought-resistant plants.

But residents of Sacramento face a 500 percent surcharge on their water bills for as long as they own their homes if they rack up four rationing violations this summer.

Up and down this golden-brown state, water officials and residents are struggling for ways to cope with one of the worst droughts in recorded history.

About 100 of those water officials met here Thursday to share ideas.

The officials learned that conditions now are nearly identical to those of 1929-34, the driest stretch ever

Please see CENTRAL COAST — A2

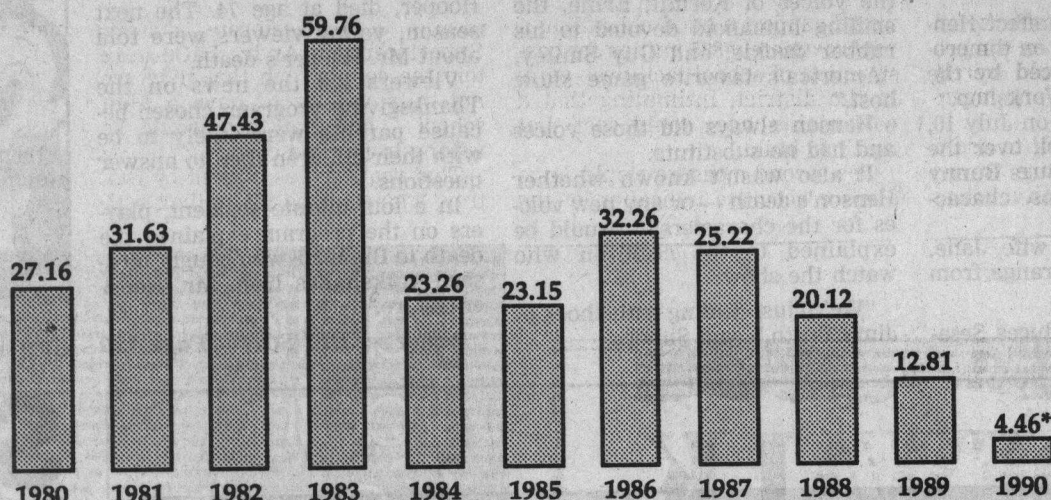


Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Jim Laznicka of Santa Cruz takes water problems into his own hands.

SC-Perth.
5-17-90

Santa Cruz Annual Rainfall



*To date

Judy Seidel/Sentinel

Central Coast hit hardest

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recorded.

"It's no longer enough to ask people to conserve and pray for rain," said Dick Heuer, chairman of the Monterey Peninsula Water Management District. Monterey and other Central Coast communities are hardest hit by the drought.

In the case of Sacramento, water rates are so low that officials had to come up with something drastic to get their customers' attention, according to Suzanne Butterfield of the state Drought Center. Timing is important, said Dick Bennett, water conservation administrator for the East Bay Municipal Water District. East Bay MUD was the first Northern California district to try voluntary cutbacks in 1987, the first year of this four-year drought.

"We politely asked them to conserve and they politely declined," Bennett said. Since then, he said, has been able to achieve sizable cutbacks through both voluntary and mandatory means.

Fairness in rationing was a big topic of discussion.

"If you ration by an across-the-board percentage it's unfair to those who have been frugal with their water use," said Heuer of Monterey. "If you ration per capita, residents on small lots near the ocean get an advantage over those on large lots living in warmer areas," he said. Monterey has adjusted and readjusted its regulations and now uses a combination of both percentage and per-capita means.

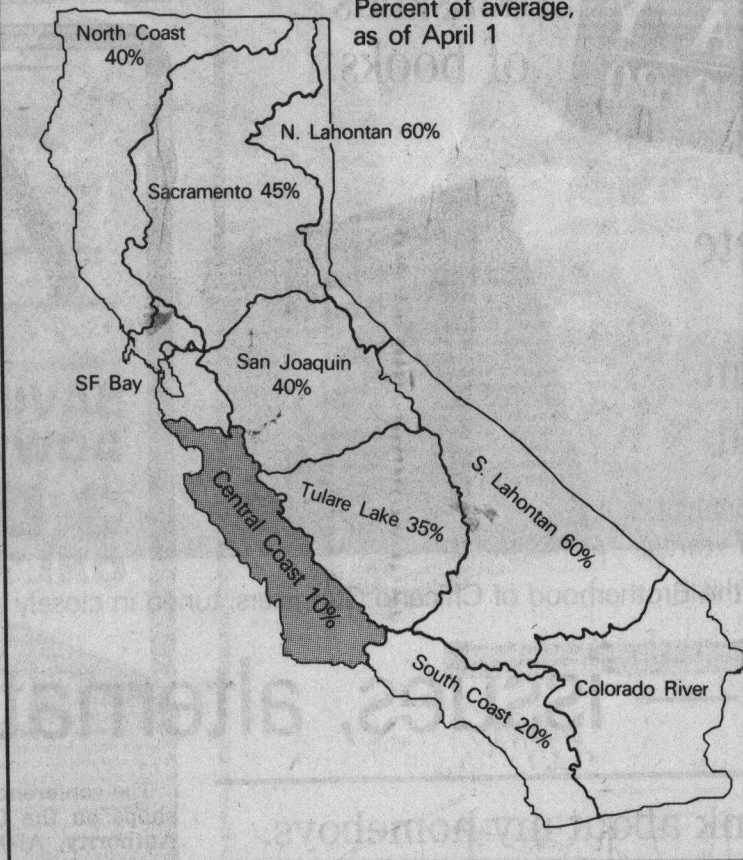
Santa Cruz City Water Department has one of the more complicated formulas, based both on data drawn from billing histories and from a census survey. Allocations are made according to household type and number of members.

Ann Marie Mitroff, water conservation coordinator, said that up to 55 percent of the water customers will have only to continue normal conservation practices to meet the summer rationing quotas.

Santa Cruz is in a bit better shape than other Central Coast communities. Loch Lomond storage currently stands at about 48 percent of capacity.

Statewide the figure is 75 percent of normal, but elsewhere on the Central Coast, reservoir storage is

Seasonal runoff, Percent of average, as of April 1



Map shows the Central Coast hydrologic area is hardest hit by drought.

only 20 percent of normal. Central Coast reservoirs are as dry as they were in 1977, the worst-ever drought year, according to Butterfield of the state Drought Center.

The critical statistic this year is seasonal runoff, she said. What little rain has fallen this year has been swallowed up by the parched earth, creating a meager 10 percent runoff along the Central Coast.

The situation is so critical in Santa Barbara, for example, that residents have been ordered to cut consumption by 45 percent. The city also is importing water from the California State Water Project and is studying the feasibility of desalinating ocean water.

What makes this year so special, Butterfield said, is that the drought extends to Southern California. Squeezed by all of its sources, Los Angeles, for example, has ordered a 10 percent cut in consumption, Butterfield said. The drought is affecting more than just humans in Northern California. Rising water temperatures and falling water levels are threatening the supply of Chinook salmon. In an unprecedented move, Butterfield said, cold water is being released from Lake Shasta into the Sacramento River.

Forests are falling prey to insects. Some 6 billion board feet of lumber were lost from 1987-89, Butterfield said. That figure could double by the end of the year, she said.