

Dry December renews fears of prolonged drought

By MARK A. STEIN
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MONTEREY — A decidedly dry December has evaporated hopes that October rains might have ended California's drought, and state water officials are starting to urge renewal of conservation programs and limited rationing in some areas.

Hardest hit is the area from Monterey to Santa Barbara, where one reservoir has run dry,

others have shrunk to as little as 12 percent of capacity and the ground water table has fallen "drastically" — as much as 15 feet — as wells are asked to work overtime.

Mandatory cuts of 20 percent in water use have been made law in Monterey and Santa Barbara counties, with cuts of 40 percent only two or three months away. Elsewhere in the state, water agencies are dusting off conser-

vation plans that were shelved after unseasonable storms of only a few months ago.

Meanwhile, on the eve of the traditionally busy Christmas-New Year holiday, Sierra resorts have scaled back skiing and other snow activities. One Southern Sierra facilities may have a hard time opening its downhill runs at all, while Tahoe-area resorts will do so only by spreading a film of artificial snow over a thin base.

Statewide, the drought information center in Sacramento reports that runoff has been a disappointing 65 percent of normal since September and reservoirs are well below half full. Central Valley farmers have been warned not to count on their normal irrigation supplies as that water is shifted to cities.

"We are facing the driest December we've ever seen," said Larry Foy, vice president of the

California-American Water Co. on the Monterey Peninsula. "We have not had a December entirely without rain — ever — and we have had no rain at all so far."

The peninsula, including Monterey, Pacific Grove and Carmel, usually receives four inches of rain in December, about one-fifth of its annual total. Late-season rains in March and early rains in October were only

enough to stem the fall in reservoir levels, not enough to raise them or ease restrictions, Foy said.

The situation is worse in Santa Barbara, where the Gibraltar Reservoir near Montecito has been exhausted and Lake Cachuma is at its lowest point ever, 30 percent of capacity. Local officials there have been worried enough to consider — and, for

now, reject — a costly plan to import water from Canada in tanker ships.

Bill Helms of the state Department of Water Resources said that a number of other regions of the state, including the San Joaquin Valley and Tulare Basin, also are "critically dry" and must get rain this year to avoid serious and — in the case of overdrafted aquifers where pesticides and fertilizers are being concentrated — perhaps permanent problems.

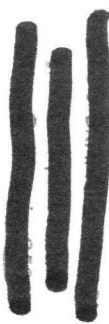
"The problem is that it started well, but it hasn't kept pace with what it should have," Helms said of the current rainy season, which had a promisingly drizzly debut in September, then slid into a dismal series of sunny days.

Clear skies not only meant no rain, they meant dry winter winds are free to eat voraciously at the Sierra snowpack and thus threaten runoff in the spring. Helms said the statewide snowpack dipped from above average in October to only 35 percent of normal at the beginning of December.

Despite all of this, Helms said it's "too early to panic." Just ahead lie the typically soggy months of January and February, and he noted that "a lot can happen in a short time." In 1986, for example, the state received half of its normal annual precipitation in just 10 stormy days. Also, the construction of several major dams and reservoirs make it unlikely the state will suffer as much as it did during the 1976-'77 drought.

Dan Bowman, a forecaster for the private WeatherData Inc. in Wichita, Kan., said that there is some promise of rain early in January if a storm system forming in the mid-Pacific gains enough strength to muscle through the stubborn high-pressure ridge that has diverted other storms north to Oregon, Washington and Western Canada.

REFERENCE



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