

Early-season downpours not enough, experts say

Santa Cruz needs steady rain to avert another drought year

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"This is not a good-looking trend," said Bill Kocher, director of the Santa Cruz Water Department.

The Santa Cruz water department is the largest in Santa Cruz County. It serves 85,000 customers in Santa Cruz, Live Oak and at the University of California, Santa Cruz campus.

The reservoir is low not because customers have suddenly become water wasters. In fact, they've kept up conservation habits even though no restrictions or rationing were in place this summer, using 17 percent less water this summer than in pre-drought years of the mid-1980s. The problem is that there has only been one normal rain year out of the last eight, said Kocher.

That was two years ago, when a wet winter filled reservoirs all over California. For the first time since 1986, Loch Lomond reached capacity that year, 2.9 billion gallons, and poured over its spillway.

"That one year got us off the hook," said Kocher.

But last winter, rainfall returned to drought levels. Only 30.6 inches of rain fell in the Loch Lomond watershed last year. The normal rainfall is 52 inches a year.

If rainfall this winter is below normal, Santa Cruz will have to consider some use restrictions for next summer, Kocher said, although probably not as strict as rationing.

Kocher said he couldn't impose rationing last summer or the year before because locals had seen television pictures of the reservoir spilling over.

"People would have lynched me," he said, laughing.

Unlike surrounding water districts in Soquel, Capitola, Watsonville and San Jose, the city of Santa Cruz has had no success in finding large underground aquifers and relies heavily on surface water such as the reservoir and rivers.

In Santa Clara County, officials do not anticipate rationing, and say the county probably has enough reserve water underground to get through one dry winter.

Meanwhile, the early planning stages are under way on a major project to ensure Santa Cruz has water into the 21st century. The city will drill test wells in farm fields along the rural northern Santa Cruz County coast, hoping to find brackish water — slightly salty, but less salty than seawater, at about 1,500 feet underground. If successful, the city council has indicated it wants to build a \$39 million desalination plant to filter the water and pipe it to homes.

Water officials and city leaders familiar with the idea say desalination could provide water far more cheaply for Santa Cruz's growing population than building a new dam.