

Who'll start the rain? January shaping up to be driest in more than century

Weather
By **TOM RAGAN**

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — With only eight days left in January, the month is turning out to be the driest since 1893, according to the National Weather Service in Monterey.

Only two tenths of an inch of rain has fallen in Santa Cruz and only 0.08 inches in Watsonville, turning many fields into nothing but dry earth and forcing some farmers to irrigate.

The driest January ever recorded in the area was in 1976, when only 0.32 inches of rain fell, said meteorologist Bob Benjamin.

To understand how little rain that is, consider this: The average rainfall for January in Santa Cruz County is usually just under 6 inches.

"Two tenths of an inch is nothing," said Benjamin, who attributed the lack of rainfall to an unusually strong high pressure system that's preventing typical Pacific Ocean storms from blowing ashore.

The lack of rain, in many ways, has served as a double whammy for farmers.

If there were rain, there wouldn't be a freeze, they reason. Many wouldn't be facing tens of thousands of dollars in losses that frost wrought on the leafy greens and artichokes in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties.

And yet, some farmers are irrigating crops not to make up for the lack of rain but as a means to warm the land and reduce the damage around their plants, according to Dick Peixoto, a vegetable grower in Watsonville.

"We have to irrigate in order to keep the

plants from burning up," he said, referring to the burn frost causes on many leafy greens. "We run the irrigation during the afternoon so they don't dehydrate at night."

Berry grower John E. Eiskamp said the Pajaro Valley needs more rain to replenish the aquifer at a time when water is scarce in California and the region is struggling with saltwater seeping into wells along the coast.

"The last thing we want to see is a drought," he said.

Benjamin said rain could return as early as next week, and the rainy season isn't close to over.

"It's just a period of dryness that we're experiencing," he said.

Contact Tom Ragan at tragan@santacruzsentinel.com.

Rain dance? *1.24.07*

LOWEST RECORD OF RAINFALL RECORDED IN JANUARY SINCE 1893 (IN INCHES):

1976: 0.32.

1984: 0.33.

1934: 0.61.

1991: 0.81.

2007: 0.08 has fallen in Watsonville in January and 0.20 in Santa Cruz.

2006: 4.05 recorded in Watsonville; 6.37 in Santa Cruz.

January's average: 4.45 in Watsonville; 5.95 in Santa Cruz.