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Drought watchers say 1991 bad, not terrible

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Rationing programs continue throughout California as drought watchers over parts of Northern California looked back on a rainy season that lifted the state "from a near catastrophic situation up to a bad situation."

"We'll be muddling through much like this year with very restrictive rationing programs probably more so than last year," said National Weather Service meteorologist Duane Dykema. "If it goes as dry as it did in 1977, which we thought was going to happen this year up until March, then it will be really devastating on our economy."

Light rains drizzled over Northern California on Monday but the amounts were not significant, said Bill Helms, of the state drought center in Sacramento.

"The bottom line, of course, is that we're still in the critical drought situation," said Helms. The benchmark of the drought, runoff from the Sacramento River basin, is expected to be the lowest in the past five years, he said.

Runoff for an average year is 18.91 million acre feet, Helms said. Figures for the last five years are 9.2 million acre feet in 1987 and 1988, 14.8 million in 1989 and 9.2 million in 1990. This year's projection is 8.7 million

acre feet. The driest year ever was 5.1 million acre feet in 1977, Helms said.

Showers fell from San Jose to Santa Rosa on Monday morning,

said the rainfall was not significant. Less than a tenth of an inch had been measured at the NWS station in Redwood City.

"Most of the helpful rains end in March," he said.

The rainy season stretches from November to March, with most of the rain falling in December through February, he said.

As of Sunday, San Francisco had received 13.8 inches of rain for the year, measured from July 1 through June 30, which is about 72 percent of normal, Dykema said. San Jose got 11.72 inches, 88 percent of normal and Oakland and 14.17 inches, or 80 percent of normal.

While a few more showers were likely this week, the weather is sliding into its typical summer mode of "sunny and dry," Dykema said. "It's pretty easy to do a 90-day outlook for this time of year," he said.

A rainy season that ended with an unusually wet March saved the region from disaster, Helms said.

Another dry year could mean even more severe rationing, he said.