RECORD DRY WEATHER

WORRIES GROW OVER DRY CONDITIONS

DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Farm workers prepare a berry field for irrigation off San Andreas Road in Watsonville on Thursday.

Santa Cruz had just 5.07 inches of rain in 2013 compared to 29.33 inches of normal precipitation, the lowest recorded rainfall total since 1929

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Water Supply - 2000

By SHANNA MCCORD

smccord@santacruzsentinel.com

APTOS — The flawless winter weather has turned from enjoyable to worrisome as Santa Cruz County continues to experience its driest days on record.

At a time of year Santa Cruz County should be soaked from rainstorms, the ground is parched and rivers and reservoirs are substantially below normal — all of which pose a serious threat to the region's water supply, fire conditions and water-reliant industries such as agriculture.

The Loch Lomond Reservoir, a large water source located in the Santa Cruz Mountains, is at 66 percent of capacity, the lowest it's been in 15 years.

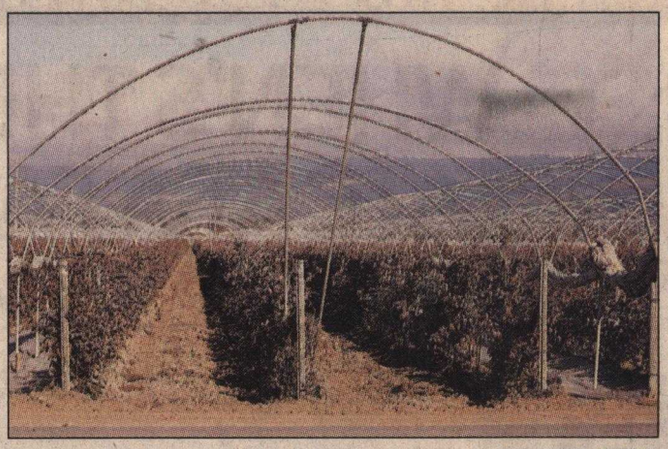
The county saw the least amount of rain in 2013 than it had since 1929 when only 11.86 inches fell, according to the National Weather Service in Monterey.

Rainfall totals were a fraction of normal last year, meteorologist Diana Henderson said.

Santa Cruz received 5 inches last year compared with about 29 inches during a normal year. Ben Lomond received 7.62 inches of rain versus the usual 49 inches. Watsonville saw about 3.5 inches compared with 21.5 inches in a normal year.

In 2013, the National Weather

SEE **RAIN** ON **A4**



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Brown, brittle berry bushes along Riverside Drive in Watsonville.

RECORD DRY CONDITIONS

	2013 RAINFALL	NORMAL
Santa Cruz	5.07 inches	29.33 inches
Watsonville	3.51 inches	21.52 inches
Ben Lomond	7.62 inches	49.25 inches

SOURCE: National Weather Service

RAIN

Continued from **A1**

Service lists Santa Cruz County as having received 4.78 inches of rain.

"It's awful actually," said Live Oak resident Justin Frey, 33. "I'm really concerned on the bigger scale about the water tables and going into next summer."

Frey and some of his friends took advantage of the warm, dry weather on Thursday to ride mountain bikes in Aptos. The three agreed the summer conditions are nice, but a wet spell would be welcome.

"I can't complain, but at the same time it's a little frightening," Frey said.

His friend Allison Oliver, who lives in Truckee, pays close attention to the climate through her work as an aquatic ecologist.

She worries the sparse snowfall in the Sierra Nevada has taken a toll on the ski industry, fish, native species and spring runoff.

"There's no way we're going to make up the deficit," Oliver said. "Even with a miracle March."

DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Parched hillsides border homes in Scotts Valley.

DESPERATE FOR RAIN

In 52 years as cattle ranchers in the foothills outside of Watsonville, Frank and Loretta Estrada have never been so desperate for rain.

Only 1.9 inches fell at the ranch last year. Usually they get upward of 19 inches, Loretta Estrada said.

Two of the four creeks on their 1,500-acre ranch, which usually run year-round, have dwindled to a trickle and not an inch of green grass exists for cattle to graze, she said.

The small lake in front of their house is bone dry, something she's never seen in more than five decades.

"It's really, really bad," Estrada, 70, said. "It's a horrible feeling. I pray to God we get some rain sometime soon. For us, it's affects everything."

The Estradas have resorted to hauling water to the ranch along with three or four bales of hay daily to keep their 65 cattle alive.

They've sold some older bulls to help cut costs, Estrada said.

"You get rid of your weakest ones," she said. "You have to."

Estrada said her friends in the cattle industry statewide, particularly the San Joaquin Valley, are also feeling the pain of no rain.

Undoubtedly, she believes the long-term impact for consumers will be higher prices for meat and milk products at the grocery store.

"It's not going to be a good year," Estrada said. "It's not just us. It's everyone."

The dry winter is also forcing fruit and vegetable farmers in the Pajaro Valley to pump water at a time they would normally rely on rain to irrigate fields.

Pumping water from underground to feed the farm fields only exacerbates the ongoing overdraft problems facing Soquel Creek Water District.

"It's really a double whammy," said longtime farmer Dick Peixoto of Lakeside Organics in the Pajaro Valley. "We're pumping more and not getting the recharge in the aquifer. We had a similar situation in 1977."

WHY OH WHY

Meteorologists say the summer weather in January is due to a stubborn ridge of high pressure parked over the Pacific Ocean.

Normally, such high pressure zones come and go every few weeks in the winter, meteorologist Henderson said. This one has sat off the West Coast for more than a year, the longest since 1948.

Storms that would normally move eastward are hitting the ridge and being pushed around it to Alaska and British Columbia, instead of bringing rain to California.

There are about two months left of winter for the high ridge to dissipate, allowing rain to drench the state in February and March thus preventing water rationing and fallowed farm fields come summer.

However, meteorologists say there's no sign of change any time soon.

"There's a slight chance of sprinkles on Saturday more north of the Golden Gate (bridge)," Henderson said. "But no one's holding their breath here. Models are just sort of hinting at it right now."

Follow Sentinel reporter Shanna McCord at Twitter.com/scnewsmom