

Storms fill reservoirs, snowpack

Rainfall promises plenty of water, but disrupts navel harvest

Tim Hearden, Capital Press Ag Weekly, 12-22-10

California's record-setting rainfall in the past week has left many reservoirs flush with water and mountains smothered in snow.

The state's Department of Water Resources is predicting its deliveries of state project water will be at least half of contractors' requests -- an extraordinarily high amount for this early in the season.

"The usual procedure is to start out conservatively at the first of the water year and see what kind of direction Mother Nature is going to take," DWR spokesman Don Strickland said. "Obviously she is going in the right direction now, so it's not beyond the possibility that water allocations could be increased again provided the storms keep coming on through."

The prediction comes as the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has been releasing water from several nearly full reservoirs to make room for more.

At Shasta Lake, crews have been sending 15,000 cubic feet per second down the Sacramento River, up from the normal 7,000 cfs. Releases from Folsom Lake near Sacramento were increased from 15,000 cfs to 30,000 cfs, and the Tolluch Reservoir on the Stanislaus River has been letting out 1,500 cfs rather than the normal 200 cfs.

Bureau officials expected releases to ease back to normal by this weekend as the deluge lets up, spokesman Pete Lucero said.

"With all of our reservoirs, one of their main purposes is for flood control," Lucero said. "With these storms coming in this past weekend and coming up this week, we need to be sure we have enough flood reservation space within the reservoirs."

There's plenty more water coming. As of Tuesday, Dec. 21, the water content in snowpack statewide was 204 percent of normal for this time of year, including 274 percent of normal for the southern Sierra Nevada.

The abundance follows nearly a week of virtually nonstop precipitation throughout the state -- particularly in usually parched Central California. About 40 residents of the San Joaquin Valley farming community of McFarland were briefly evacuated Monday, Dec. 20, for fear of flooding.

From Dec. 17 to 21, Visalia sopped up 4.29 inches of rain, while 3.92 inches fell in Bakersfield, 4.41 inches were recorded in Delano and 3.25 inches fell in Hanford, according to the National Weather Service.

Fresno has received 3.19 inches of rain so far in December -- a big leap from its normal 0.8 inches.

"I haven't seen this much (rain) at one time in quite a while," said Bob Blakely, director of industry relations for the Exeter-based California Citrus Mutual. "It's pretty much shut us down for the week, although we've gotten a break today (Tuesday) which may allow some packing houses to get in if they've got some sandier soil and the fruit dries off."

Rainfall is generally good for the navel orange harvest, which is in high gear at this time of year. But too much of it shuts down picking and could lead to rind deterioration and fungus-infected trees, Blakely said.

The West has been locked in a La Niña pattern this winter, with lots of storms pelting the Pacific Northwest and far Northern California. But lately, a persistent parade of storm clouds has been dousing virtually all of California, and that parade may not end soon.

"It looks like it pretty much continues in that pattern," said George Cline, a National Weather Service forecaster in Sacramento. "The storm door is open, I guess, and we are tending to get these systems coming through."