

Plentiful snowpack boosts delivery forecasts for farms, but shortages may persist

Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee, 5-5-10

Nature blessed the Golden State with an abundant snowpack this year, and the rivers are rushing with cold, clear melt water. But the blessings won't include an end to California's water wars.

State and federal water agencies on Tuesday both boosted their water delivery forecasts in response to the rich snowpack, which stood at 149 percent of normal statewide as of Monday.

Yet the state's complicated plumbing and varied geography mean some areas may still experience shortages, either because they didn't get enough rainfall locally to recover from three drought years, or because they can't import enough water from elsewhere.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation announced Tuesday that one of California's hardest-hit farming regions, the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, will get 40 percent of its contracted water deliveries. That's substantially better than the 10 percent offered at this time last year, and better than the 30 percent forecast last month.

Yet some view the new forecast, instead, as a 60 percent cut.

"Coming on the heels of two horrible years for water deliveries, it's still little hope for the devastated communities that are trying to limp along on these dismal water supplies," said Mike Wade, executive director of the California Farm Water Coalition.

The California Department of Water Resources on Tuesday also increased its delivery forecast from 30 percent to 40 percent of contract amounts.

Despite the improving picture, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger apparently has no intention of calling an end to the drought. It was he who first declared, in June 2008, that California was suffering from one.

There is no official protocol for either declaring or canceling a drought. Rather, it's a subjective call based on a variety of complex factors related to hydrology and economics.

"We know there are places in California this year that will be experiencing water shortages," said Wendy Martin, drought coordinator at the state Department of Water Resources.

The Sacramento region has normal water supplies and has not imposed special, drought-related conservation measures, although various jurisdictions have permanent rules that allow watering only on particular days of the week.

Area water agencies recently told customers in a press release that the wet winter is "not a free pass to waste water."

They urged residents to continue using water wisely, because they must comply with a new state law that sets a 10 percent conservation target in 2015, then 20 percent in 2020.

"Our water use per capita has been dropping, and our customers have done a spectacular job of working with

us," said Shauna Lorance, general manager of the San Juan Water District, which serves portions of Roseville, Granite Bay, Orangevale and Folsom. "If everybody can keep that going, it's going to make meeting the requirement much more effective."

Lake Oroville illustrates the need for a cautious posture. It is the primary supply point for DWR's State Water Project, which supplies urban areas including Los Angeles, San Diego and parts of Silicon Valley.

Oroville and its Feather River watershed mysteriously missed much of the wintertime largess this year, and this week the reservoir stood only 69 percent full.

At the other extreme is Lake Shasta, California's largest reservoir. It's 97 percent full, with much of the upstream snowpack still waiting to melt.

"It's been a dramatic recovery, really it has," Peggy Manza, a hydraulic engineer at reclamation, said of Lake Shasta's nearly full condition.

Reclamation has been releasing water from Shasta to make room for snowmelt and to meet legal requirements to maintain cool temperatures in the Sacramento River for salmon.

Others see that water leaving Shasta and wonder why they can't have it.

Wade criticized new federal rules, called biological opinions, that regulate reservoir releases and water diversions from the Delta to protect salmon and Delta smelt.

On Tuesday, state and federal agencies were diverting less than 1 percent of the freshwater flowing through the Delta from its many upstream tributaries.

"There's plenty of water, but the water users aren't getting it," Wade said.

In reality, those new rules aren't yet restricting water deliveries.

The present limit on water diversions in the Delta, effective until May, has been in place for a decade to protect salmon. And temperature requirements in the Sacramento River have also existed for years.

Bill Kier, a fisheries biologist who consults with salmon fishermen, said it is easy for some to complain that freshwater leaving the Delta is "wasted" by flowing to the sea. But these flows help create conditions conducive to food production, he said, which in turn could boost fish populations in future years.

That could mean one less fight in the water war.

"So it's not water wasting to the sea," he said. "It's water doing what nature intended."