

Calif. snow level is better, wetter than expected

Peter Fimrite, San Francisco Chronicle, 3-2-11

California's perpetually pessimistic water lords were looking on the bright side Tuesday after their monthly slog through the snow to assess the state's frozen water supply.

The water content of the snow in the Sierra is well above normal for March, according to measurements taken manually and electronically throughout the state. The mountains statewide actually contain more frozen water than what would be standard a month from now, when snowpack in California is typically at its peak.

"We're actually doing much better than I expected," said Frank Gehrke, the chief snow surveyor for the California Department of Water Resources, after taking measurements at historic Phillips Station off Highway 50 near Lake Tahoe. "We went pretty much all of January and two weeks of February with virtually zero precipitation, but then things started back up. The snow sensors picked up upwards of 10 inches of water content during the past couple of weeks. That's a very respectable increase."

And, there's more rain and snow on its way, according to forecasts.

The water content of the snow is what is used to gauge how much drinking water will be available in California during the year. Up to 60 percent of the state's water is contained in the Sierra snowpack. It is used to quench the thirst of millions after it melts in the spring and summer.

The water content Tuesday was 128 percent of normal at Phillips, the spot where Gehrke traditionally announces the results. Water content statewide is 124 percent of normal for this time of year.

More important, Gehrke said, the water stored in the snow is 109 percent of what would be normal on April 1. That measurement is important because the Department of Water Resources is required during the winter to leave a certain amount of space in its reservoirs - from 10 to 20 percent of capacity - for flood-control purposes. Those restrictions are generally relaxed in March.

"Even if we do get quite a bit of snow melt in March, we will be able to capture it, so we'll now be able to start to build reservoir storage," Gehrke said. "It should put us in pretty good shape."

As it is, plenty of water is sloshing around behind most of the state's dams. Lake Oroville, the primary storage reservoir for the State Water Project, is 76 percent of capacity, which is 106 percent of normal for this time. Shasta Lake, which is part of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Central Valley Project and is the largest reservoir in the state, is currently at 83 percent of capacity, or 112 percent of normal.

The state supplies water that flows through the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to 25 million people and 750,000 acres of agricultural land, about a third of California households, industries and farms.

Low precipitation in recent years added to the many problems that state water managers have been grappling with, including aging infrastructure and ongoing battles over water deliveries. Even this year they expect to deliver only 60 percent of the water that cities and agencies have requested in 2011, mainly because of pumping restrictions to protect threatened and endangered fish, department officials said.

Though plentiful, the winter snowfall has been wildly unpredictable, with epic storms pounding the state only to

be followed by weeks of dry, often balmy, weather. That's not normal for the prevailing La Niña weather pattern, which usually means early rains followed by cold, dry conditions in the late winter and spring.

"Mother Nature has been capricious," Gehrke said. "You typically don't see these kind of numbers in a La Niña year."

Another thing folks don't normally see is higher snowfall totals in Southern California, but accumulated snow in the southland has consistently outpaced every other location this winter. The water content in the snow in the northern and central Sierra is currently at 115 and 121 percent of normal, respectively. The southern Sierra is 139 percent of average.

Capricious or not, Gehrke said, the mercurial matron of meteorological phenomena is providing California with the water it needs.

"Things are a lot brighter now that we've got this snow on the ground," he said. "There's more of a comfort level."