

Sierra Snowpack at 30 Percent of Normal, But Reservoirs Are Still Pretty Full

Paul Rogers, Bay Area News Group, 2-29-12

California's Sierra Nevada snow pack levels are just 30 percent of normal for this time of year, state water officials said Tuesday. But experts said not to expect water restrictions this summer because many of the state's reservoirs and aquifers are still brimming from last year's wet winter.

This year's thin snowfall, the result of an unusually dry winter storm season, means the Sierra snow pack -- California's primary water source -- is at its lowest level at the end of February since the 1991 drought, when it was at 18 percent of the historic average.

But on Tuesday, the state's major reservoirs, still swollen from the 2010 storms, were 104 percent of normal for this time of year. And groundwater banks in Silicon Valley and many other parts of the state are at healthy levels.

"We need very wet conditions in March to bring us up to anywhere near average snow levels," said Ted Thomas, a spokesman for the state Department of Water Resources. "The bright spot is that we do have good carry-over reservoir storage from last year's very wet winter."

All three of the Bay Area's largest water districts said Tuesday that they don't expect any mandatory restrictions on water use for their customers this summer.

"If we hadn't had such a good year last year, we might be looking at a drought this year, but since last year was so good, it's probably not the 'D' word this year," said Marty Grimes, a spokesman for the Santa Clara Valley Water District.

Representatives of the East Bay Municipal Utility District and the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, echoed those sentiments.

"We don't anticipate we'll be asking people to ration," said Steve Ritchie, assistant general manager of the San Francisco PUC, which provides water from its Hetch Hetchy system to 2.6 million people in San Francisco, San Mateo County and parts of Santa Clara and Alameda counties.

"Our customers have been really good at using water wisely," Ritchie said. "But every year, everything resets. If it's a bad year next year, we'll re-evaluate and there could be some kind of rationing in 2013."

With water managers hoping for a "Miracle March," the month may be off to a good start. Significant Sierra storms were predicted for Tuesday night and Wednesday.

The National Weather Service issued a winter storm warning through Wednesday night with snow accumulations of up to 24 inches in the Lake Tahoe area. Forecasters predicted hazardous driving conditions along Interstate 80, Highway 50 and Highway 89 in the Tahoe area, with winds up to 100 miles an hour on some Sierra ridges. More snow is forecast for Thursday, with a break over the weekend, and a new storm likely next Wednesday and Thursday.

The Bay Area is facing a similar pattern, with rain forecast Wednesday and Thursday, followed by a dry weekend, and another storm system likely next Tuesday.

Until now, the season has turned out to be one of the driest in recorded history.

Since July 1, San Jose has received 2.84 inches of rain, just 25 percent of the historic average for this date. Oakland has received 37 percent of normal, with 5.69 inches, and San Francisco stands at 38 percent of normal with 6.86 inches.

Other parts of the state, including Los Angeles, Fresno and Redding, also are at or just below 50 percent of normal.

"There's been a persistent dome of high pressure over the West Coast that has steered storms

into the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia," said meteorologist Jan Null of Golden Gate Weather Services in Saratoga.

Last year, Null said, the conditions were just the opposite: A pressure trough steered storm after storm into California.

"If you average the two years out, it should be just about normal," he said with a laugh.

That wet year paid dividends.

The vast underground aquifers where Santa Clara County stores much of its water are above normal levels. The Santa Clara Valley Water District reports that by the end of this year, they will hold roughly 350,000 acre feet -- an amount equal to all the water used by the county's 1.8 million people in a year.

Meanwhile, the district has another 324,000 acre feet stored underground near Bakersfield at the Semitropic Water District. So while its 10 local reservoirs are only 41 percent full, it has significant stores underground.

Other agencies have large amounts stored in reservoirs.

Hetch Hetchy and Crystal Springs reservoirs are 76 and 73 percent full, respectively. And Pardee Reservoir, in Calaveras County -- the main storage area for East Bay MUD's 1.3 million customers in Alameda and Contra Costa County -- is 84 percent full.

The dry winter is already causing some problems, however. Ranchers with no irrigation for their cattle pastures are having a difficult time, and fire officials are worried that without much more rain and snow, this summer could be a rough fire season.

Despite their "money in the bank," with water from last year, many water managers are still anxious.

"Every day that it's dry," said Charles Hardy, a spokesman for East Bay MUD, "people in the water business get