

California on course for driest year on record

By Tom Ichniowski, San Francisco Chronicle, 11-10-13

California may get a smidgen of rain this coming week, but it is not likely to change what, so far, is the driest calendar year in recorded history.

At all, only 3.95 inches of rain fell in San Francisco in October and only 3.95 inches has fallen since Jan. 1, the smallest amount of precipitation to date since record keeping began 164 years ago, according to the National Weather Service.

It may still change, but the storm predicted to roll in Monday and Tuesday has already petered out, according to forecasters, who are expecting only sprinkles, if that.

"Completely dry," said Bob Benjamin, a National Weather Service forecaster. "We just went through October and there was no measurable precipitation in downtown San Francisco. That's only happened seven times in the record since it started."

The previous record dry year was in 1976, when 5.57 inches of rain fell in San Francisco over the 311 days from Jan. 1 and Nov. 7. Meteorologists use San Francisco as a benchmark because it has the longest continuous rainfall record in the state, going back to 1849-50.

"It's probably going to be reflective of what we would expect throughout the Bay Area," Benjamin said. "It's probably safe to assume that the other areas are close to the lowest if they aren't at the lowest."

Driest record

The record-dry table was set over the first five months of the year, when the bulk of the rain normally falls. Only 1.5 inches of rain fell in the city between January and May— a record set for the lowest amount of rainfall in any stretch of time. There has been very little precipitation since then, but that is to be expected since the summer months are always dry, said Jan Null, a meteorologist for Golden Gate Weather Services and an assistant professor of meteorology at San Francisco State University.

"We've never had any year dryer through October," said Null, adding that there is no reason to get panicked about the months left in the year. Making predictions based on rainfall through October is, he said, "like giving up on the Giants game after eight innings."

Even though the sun is perpetually blaring, it is nevertheless giving water managers reason to be downcast. Reservoirs are all well below their normal carrying capacity, according to Arthur Hinojosa, the chief of water supply and flood operations for the California Department of Water Resources.

re fires and more frequent fires, which is due to the lack of rainfall and the dryness. We also saw a significant number of fires statewide in higher elevation timber stands, which you normally don't see. This is due to the lack of snowfall."

Not done yet'

son said the department anticipated the problem and put most of its resources into the initial attack. Only 139,128 acres have burned compared with 279,592 acres in an average year to date.

Not done yet," she said. "There are still areas of the state that are very dry, so we're really not going to take a deep breath until we have a significant amount of moisture."