

# **DROUGHT: Lack of Sierra snowmelt prompts drastic state cutbacks**

**Janet Zimmerman, Press-Enterprise, 1-31-14**

The fallout from the drought took a dramatic — and unprecedented — turn Friday when state officials announced they will not be able to make any deliveries from the State Water Project this year unless California receives significant additional rain and snowfall.

It would be the first time in the system's 54-year history that there isn't enough water in reservoirs or in anticipated snowmelt to deliver supplies to agencies serving 25 million Californians and 1,000 square miles of farmland, said Mark Cowin, director of the Department of Water Resources.

"This is not a coming crisis. This is not an evolving crisis. This is a current crisis," Cowin told reporters in a Sacramento news conference and press call.

The State Water Project ferries Sierra Nevada snowmelt through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta en route to the Inland region, where virtually all districts rely on at least some of the imported supplies.

Local officials said even with the latest news, which comes on the heels of the governor's drought declaration on Jan. 17, they don't expect mandatory cutbacks this year because of healthy storage levels.

But the state as a whole is suffering.

Also on Friday, the executive director of the State Water Resources Control Board announced emergency action to reduce releases from the system's reservoirs at the request of the state and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. Reservoirs are at their lowest levels since the 1970s.

Releases will be decreased from 7,000 cubic feet per second to 4,500 cubic feet per second; that will save 144,000 acre-feet of water in February, Tom Howard said. That is just enough to keep saltwater from entering the Delta from San Francisco Bay and contaminating the entire supply.

The releases are typically increased on Feb. 1 of each year.

The state water board also granted a request to open a cross-channel gate in the Delta to introduce more fresh water from tributaries, Howard said. The gates are usually closed to protect migrating salmon from entering the Delta, where mortality is higher.

The state water board will hold a public workshop on the emergency declarations in Sacramento on Feb. 18-19, when the public will have a chance to comment. Friday's actions, which remain in effect for six months, could be amended in response to public protests, Howard said.

In addition, curtailment notices will go out next week to 5,800 junior water rights holders in the Central Valley that draw water from rivers and streams, he said. They include large and small farms and cities, most of which have other sources of water; there will be exceptions for health and safety needs, he said.

If dry conditions persist, water use by senior rights holders also will also be cut off.

Cowin called the actions unavoidable, with 2013 ending as the driest calendar year on record and the January snowpack at just 12 percent of normal.

Earlier preliminary delivery estimates were at 5 percent, which had been the lowest ever. Preliminary delivery estimates are usually ratcheted up as the winter progresses and more rain falls. However, this year's long-range forecast is for below-normal rainfall and above-normal temperatures through April.

Inland districts and their wholesaler, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, will have to rely on leftover supplies from last year.

"Even though it has been extremely dry, we still have a couple months to go in the rainy season," said Bob Muir, Metropolitan's spokesman.

Metropolitan has enough storage to get through 2014 without imposing mandatory cutbacks for its 26 member districts, including Western Municipal in Riverside and Eastern Municipal in Perris, he said.

Metropolitan has about 414,000 acre-feet stored in the San Luis Reservoir in Northern California and at Lake Mead that can be accessed this year, Muir said. One acre-foot of water is 325,851 gallons, and is enough to supply two families in Southern California for a year.

That water likely will be used to provide for water districts in northern Los Angeles County and Ventura County that are 100 percent reliant on the State Water Project, he said.

Metropolitan also has invested in groundwater banking programs in Central California and has channeled excess water from wet years to Diamond Valley Lake near Hemet.

"Certainly we have the stored reserves. It's just a matter of how much we're going to draw them down," Muir said.

Eastern, Riverside County's largest water district, gets about 36 percent of its water from the state project.

On Wednesday, Feb. 5, Eastern's board of directors will hear a staff presentation on the drought and review possible actions. No mandatory restrictions are expected this year, district spokesman Kevin Pearson said.

"This isn't the panic button for us. But it is important that everybody understand that they need to do everything they can to conserve and cut back their usage, because we don't know how long this drought is going to last," he said.

Metropolitan is expected to increase its funding to conservation efforts, and the governor called on residents to voluntarily cut their use by 20 percent.

Richard Atwater, executive director of the Southern California Water Committee, said the state is now in uncharted territory and called upon residents to save more.

"No matter how much water you use, it's time to use less," he said.