

Dismal snowpack points to third straight dry year

Debra Kahn, Environment & Energy Publishing, 1-3-14

California's snowpack is at record low levels, indicating the state may be entering its third straight year of dry conditions, according to measurements taken today.

Snowpack levels are the lowest on record, matching levels in 2012, when they were at 20 percent of average for this time of year. Officials are worried that farms won't have enough water to irrigate crops and that dry conditions will raise the risk of wildfires.

"While we hope conditions improve, we are fully mobilized to streamline water transfers and take every action possible to ease the effects of dry weather on farms, homes and businesses as we face a possible third consecutive dry year," said Department of Water Resources Director Mark Cowin. "And every Californian can help by making water conservation a daily habit."

The state's snow survey found more bare ground than snow at a spot near Lake Tahoe that is the site of monthly readings taken from January through May. The survey found 2.3 inches of water content, with 9.3 inches of snow overall. Snowpack provides a third of the water used by cities and farms in the state. Rainfall is also far below average, with Sacramento, Los Angeles and other areas receiving about a quarter of their normal precipitation.

Officials are not calling the weather a drought just yet because there is still some water available in storage. But reservoir levels are low in many places, including the state's largest reservoir at Shasta Lake, which is at 37 percent of its 4.5-million-acre-foot capacity.

"While we've had record low rainfall in many parts of the state this past calendar year, in other areas that's not the case," said DWR spokesman Ted Thomas. "We're just not painting with that broad a brush at this point."