

California breaks drought record as 58 percent of state hits driest level

Joseph Serna, Los Angeles Times, 7-31-14

More than half of California is now under the most severe level of drought for the first time since the federal government began issuing regular drought reports in the late 1990s, according to new data released Thursday.

According to the U.S. Drought Monitor report, in July roughly 58% of California was considered to be experiencing an "exceptional" drought -- the harshest on a five-level scale.

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This is the first year that any part of California has seen that level of drought, let alone more than half of it, said Mark Svoboda, a climatologist with the National Drought Mitigation Center, which issued the report.

"You keep beating the record, which are still all from this year," he said.

The entire state has been in severe drought since May, but more of it has since fallen into more severe categories -- "extreme" and "exceptional." Nearly 22% more of California was added into the exceptional drought category in the last week alone.

California is also more than a year's worth of water short in its reservoirs and moisture in the state's topsoil and subsoil has nearly been depleted, according to the report.

"It's hard because the drought is not over and you're in the dry season. Our eyes are already on next winter," Svoboda said. "Outside of some freakish atmospheric conditions, reservoir levels are going to continue to go down. You're a good one to two years behind the eight ball."

The lowest reservoir levels on record were in 1977, Svoboda pointed out, but he said the vulnerability has increased as the state's population has grown.

"The bottom line is, there's a lot of ground to make up," he said. "Mother Nature can't put it back in that fast."

The drought's wide-ranging effects are being felt statewide, from Central California irrigation to northern and southern California wildfires.

Svoboda said California hasn't seen this level of drought since the 1970s and '20s.

The state recently adopted regulations that give local agencies the authority to fine those who waste water up to \$500 a day.

The report issued Thursday is a joint effort of the drought mitigation center, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration.