

Warm rains dictate new reservoirs

Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee, 2-10-15

California's winter storms come in two varieties – cold ones from the Gulf of Alaska and warm ones that pick up moisture from more tropical portions of the Pacific Ocean.

The cold ones dump lots of snow, while the warm ones bring rain, sometimes torrential rain.

Those who believe in inexorable climate change tell us that in the future, Californians will see less snow and more warm storms, such as those that whipped through Northern California over the weekend.

The storms dumped copious amounts of rain, providing respite, if not relief, from the state's prolonged drought.

Operators of the big state and federal reservoirs – Shasta, Oroville and Folsom – lowered their discharges to a minimum in hopes of maximizing the capture of storm runoff and all remained in that operational mode Monday. As a result, all were seeing their water storage, which had dropped to ominously low levels, rise.

However, all of those reservoirs were designed primarily to save melting snow runoff in the spring and are unable to capture runoff that occurs at lower elevations. Thus, even though the reservoirs were releasing almost nothing, the Sacramento River was still seeing heavy flows – runoff from watersheds below the dams.

The Sacramento's flow nearly doubled overnight to almost 30,000 cubic feet, or over 200,000 gallons, each second – water that was running to the ocean rather than being captured to further alleviate drought.

Were the weekend weather pattern of warm rain to become California's norm, as the climate change theorists say, then it implies that we should reconfigure our reservoir system to capture more winter precipitation as it falls, rather than assume that it will be stored in a snowpack and released later.

We should be building more low-elevation, off-stream storage such as the San Luis Reservoir in the Pacheco Pass west of Los Banos (which could be enlarged) or the proposed Sites reservoir in the foothills west of Colusa, which would hold about a million acre-feet of water.

Ironically, however, the same environmental groups that are so adamant about climate change are usually the same folks who oppose building the new reservoirs that would alleviate its human impacts.

It may be too much to say that they welcome water shortages, either from the drought or climate change. But they clearly yearn for Californians to change their lifestyles – less large-scale agriculture, less suburban housing, denser development, etc. – and see shortages as a means to compel that change.

Ultimately, it's a political issue, of course. After decades of inaction, the state's new water bond contains some money for storage, but whether that money is spent quickly and effectively or just sits there depends on whether the Capitol's politicians are willing to stop talking and start acting.