

Drought lingers, perhaps intensifies in 2015

Five things to watch for as California deals with yet another dry year

Alex Breitler, Stockton Record, 2-21-15

We're in a drought. That shouldn't be surprising, if you've lived in California long enough.

But maybe you haven't seen one quite like this.

2015 ushers in the fourth year of drought here. We've really had only one wet year since 2005-06. And while December's rains helped bump up some reservoirs, others — including the two most critical to Stockton — have dropped even lower.

Jeff Shields, general manager of the Manteca-based South San Joaquin Irrigation District, recently called New Melones Lake an “absolute mess.” He raised concerns that there won't be enough water to supply farmers, city dwellers and wildlife. In this region, at least, the situation is even worse than last year, Shields said.

Yet recent statewide polling shows concern about water has declined somewhat from record-high levels last fall.

“I hope people don't think this drought's over,” Shields said. “The sad part of it, but maybe a silver lining, is that the driest January in history will probably trigger some news reports” and keep the issue in the public eye.

Here are five things to watch this year as the drought continues to play out:

1. Farmers are likely to bear the brunt. San Joaquin County agriculture is a \$3 billion industry; less water can translate into reduced revenue, which impacts not only farmers but the entire county's economy.

The Stockton East Water District is warning that some farmers east of Stockton might not receive water this year. Some might be able to take more water from our fragile underground “savings account,” but others could be forced to plant lower-value forage crops.

In early February, New Hogan Lake was 16 percent full and 36 percent of normal. Much larger New Melones wasn't much better.

Delta farmers have their own concerns. Dry years bring little flow through the estuary. That allows saltier water to creep in from the west. Salt can build up in the soil and harm crop yields. State officials once again are considering installing three barriers to keep salty water out of the Delta, but the barriers are controversial in and of themselves.

State officials also are sending letters to thousands of water-right holders, warning them that their right to divert water this year might be preempted.

2. What will you be required to do at home? Like the rest of California, communities in San Joaquin and Calaveras counties have been asked to meet a 20 percent water conservation goal set by Gov. Jerry

Brown. Success so far has been mixed, though overall local communities have saved somewhere north of 3 billion gallons.

2015 is likely to bring a continuation of some kind of emergency water conservation rules. Right now, rules set to expire in April are backed by fines that can total \$500.

Stockton is more fortunate than some places. The city has a diverse supply, with the potential for tapping four separate rivers most years.

In all likelihood, less river water will be available this year and the city will be forced to pump at least some groundwater — a scenario that is not ideal.

“We’re confident we’re not going to be in panic mode,” said Bob Granberg, assistant director of the city’s Municipal Utilities Department.

3. Will Delta species disappear forever? Not to be forgotten is the stress that drought puts on wildlife, in particular vulnerable fish species.

Last year, the Delta smelt — the canary in the coal mine of the Delta’s dying ecosystem — sank to its lowest level on record. Continuation of the drought in 2015 could further imperil that species.

Salmon, too, struggle to migrate to and from the ocean when river flows are low. Last year, 95 percent of endangered winter-run Chinook salmon eggs and baby fish were killed.

In January, officials proposed making emergency changes to Delta water-quality rules, allowing more water to be held back in reservoirs now, to be used for fish and people later in the season. Similar requests occurred with some regularity last year and are expected to continue into 2015. But these decisions are trade-offs; holding back water for later can also hurt fish right now.

4. What action will Congress take? Not all of the drought story will unfold on California’s reservoirs and rivers this year. Some of it might not even unfold in California.

Criticized last year for negotiating in private with south San Joaquin Valley interests, Sen. Dianne Feinstein met recently with Northern California representatives, including Jerry McNerney, D-Stockton, to try to find common ground on a political response to the drought.

South Valley lawmakers have tried repeatedly in recent years to bypass the Endangered Species Act and send more water south to the farms and cities hit hardest by the drought. So far they have not been successful, but you can expect 2015 to bring more action in the Beltway, particularly with Republicans in control of both the House and the Senate.

5. Twin tunnels redux. Brown’s proposed twin tunnels beneath the Delta won’t be built in time to bail anyone out of the current drought, and skeptics would argue that the tunnels won’t help with future droughts, either.

But politically, a serious drought can fan the flames for large water projects, and the tunnels are no exception.

Portions of the immense \$24.5 billion plan are expected to be released for a second time in March or April, for more public comment. The revised plan moves large pumps from the northern end to the

southern end of the tunnels, and makes other changes which state officials say are intended to make the project less disruptive to Delta residents. The controversy, however, has not diminished.