

Rain fills reservoirs, but California still suffers drought's effects

Kurtis Alexander, SF Gate, 3-15-16

The drought isn't over, but the recent storms that many hope are part of a "March miracle" have put California a lot further down the road to recovery.

By Monday, seasonal rainfall jumped above the historic average across much of the state — uncommon territory over the past four years — with San Francisco notching 21 inches of rain since July 1, more than the city has seen in an entire year going back to 2011.

California's reservoirs, meanwhile, got a much-needed boost. The largest, Lake Shasta in Shasta County, rose above its average level to date for the first time in three years, and the second-largest, Butte County's Lake Oroville, reached that milestone late Monday.

"It's kind of nice to see that Mother Nature is trying to get back to an expected pattern," said Mike Anderson, the state's top climatologist. "The recent storms have really helped."

But while the wet weather has been good for California, in most places it's still not enough to make up for the damage and the deficits of the prolonged drought.

Lasting ill effects

Many communities remain behind in water storage, groundwater levels are critically low after years of over-pumping, and California's hills and valleys lack the usual moisture for plant and animal life.

"It really is a mixed bag now," Anderson said. "Farther north has certainly improved, but for the southern half of the state, things continue to be dry, or at least not as wet as they like."

Still, the bands of heavy rain that swelled Northern California creeks and rivers, knocked down trees and unleashed landslides marked a much-welcomed turnaround from February's utter lack of precipitation.

Since late Wednesday, San Francisco picked up 3.42 inches of rain, Mill Valley logged 4.32 inches and parts of the Santa Cruz Mountains recorded a whopping 10 inches.

The Sierra was graced with several feet of snow over the weekend. Squaw Valley on the north side of Lake Tahoe got 26 inches over a 24-hour period ending Sunday night, while the Heavenly ski resort on the south side of the lake received 18 inches over the same period.

Despite five spill gates open, Folsom Lake is rising once again and is nearly 70 percent full and Lake Shasta is nearly 80 percent full. Within weeks, the State Water Board will have to decide whether to ease tight water use restrictions.

Defining relief

The question of how much drought relief the storms brought, water experts say, depends on where you are, geographically speaking, and what the water supplies are.

“What a local farmer or small, rural water district considers to be drought is different than what someone managing a larger district thinks,” said Jan Null, meteorologist at Golden Gate Weather Services. “For some communities and user groups, they’re probably saying, ‘Yes, the drought is over.’ On the broader scale, though, there’s a lot of deficit to make up.”

Bay Area outlook

Bay Area water agencies report significant progress. For San Francisco and most of the East Bay, the Sierra watersheds that furnish the bulk of their supplies have seen a lot more rain and snow this winter than the past few years.

San Francisco’s Hetch Hetchy system stands at 58 percent of capacity. That’s 71 percent of where it normally is at this date, but far fuller than it’s been in recent years.

“The trend is upward,” said Alexis Dufour, water resources engineer for the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission. “We’re refilling it, but it just might take more than one year. ... Our system has multiple years of storage.”

The East Bay Municipal Utility District, which draws supplies from the Mokelumne River watershed, is similarly situated at 60 percent capacity, which amounts to 77 percent of the historic norm, but is up from previous years.

Small water districts

Meanwhile, water agencies relying exclusively on local supplies, like the Marin Municipal Water District and the city of Santa Cruz, have recently filled or are close to filling their reservoirs. While the supply looks impressive, these smaller agencies tend to have far less storage, meaning they fill up faster but struggle more during dry spells.

The large state- and federally run mountain reservoirs that supply pockets of the Bay Area, as well as other parts of the state, are similarly better off than in recent years. But just how much varies.

Lake Shasta on Monday jumped to 105 percent of its historic average, joining a handful of other Northern California reservoirs, like Lake Oroville and Folsom Lake outside Sacramento, that are benefiting from ample precipitation. Reservoirs in the southern Sierra, however, have seen less rain and sit emptier than normal.

Similarly, the snowfall that nourishes the big reservoirs is tracking along geographic lines. Snowpack in the northern Sierra and Cascades stood at 102 percent of average for the date Monday, but 81 percent of normal in the south.

Cutbacks still in place

Because of the drought, most California water agencies remain under state orders to slash deliveries 8 to 36 percent — cutbacks that have been passed on to residents in the form of outdoor watering rules and, at times, overall consumption quotas.

Felicia Marcus, chair of the State Water Resources Control Board, said Monday that the restrictions will remain in place at least until April. Regulators next month plan to reassess the water situation and their drought policy.

“I’m happy that it’s been raining,” Marcus said. “But every time the skies open up doesn’t mean the drought is over.”