

After drought, California urgently needs to focus on big picture of water management

Jay Lund, The Sacramento Bee, 1-27-17

California has largely emerged from five years of drought. This good news becomes better news if we move forward with better water management, which will prepare the state for the next drought, as well as floods.

Today, California has 112 percent of long-term average reservoir storage, 189 percent of average snowpack and more than 200 percent of average precipitation. That's above 100 percent in all these categories for the first time in six years.

Reservoir storage is now 2 million acre feet – equivalent to about two full Folsom reservoirs – above the long-term average statewide. That's up from being 3 million acre feet below average in October and 8 million acre feet below average last year. Thanks to California's interconnected water system, most of California is no longer in a surface water drought.

But drought remains in many places, however. Santa Barbara's water supply, Lake Cachuma, is at 15 percent of its normal storage for this time of year. Many groundwater basins in the San Joaquin Valley remain greatly overdrawn compared with their levels in 2011, before the drought. These aquifers will take years or decades to recover, given the San Joaquin Valley's dry climate.

Some aquifers may never recover to pre-drought levels. Many farmers and rural communities will suffer dry wells and higher pumping costs for years. The state's forests have suffered millions of tree deaths, and could require decades to recover. Some native fish populations, already in a precarious state, have been further depleted by the drought and will take years to recover with great effort and sacrifice.

California is normally a dry place, with some years that are drier than normal and some much wetter. With today's wetter conditions, California must pivot its water management and policy from the frenzy of drought to balanced preparation for future droughts and floods.

With its dry climate, parts of California will receive less water than all users would like. In droughts, most areas must be prepared for deeper water shortages. To retain flexibility, balance and public confidence, "drought" actions should be reserved for drier years, with substantial conservation, but with less extreme measures in every year.