

California shortages not over, water resources agency says

Despite normal levels of rain and snowpack over the winter, some key areas remain low and conservation should continue to be a way of life, state says.

Bettina Boxall, Los Angeles Times, 4-2-10

Despite a return to normal snowpack and precipitation this winter, state officials said water shortages will continue this summer and urged continued conservation efforts.

The Department of Water Resources on Thursday slightly increased allocations in the state system that helps supply urban Southern California. Managers said they might be able to raise projected deliveries again next month but warned that they expect the final numbers to be no more than last year -- about 40% of full allocation, which prompted rationing in many Southland cities, including Los Angeles.

"The impression seems to be that the drought has been broken," said Water Resources Director Mark Cowin. But "clearly we're going to have water shortages this year. We all need to conserve water."

He blamed the hit-or-miss nature of winter storms that have pushed statewide precipitation and snowpack to average or slightly higher levels for this time of year but that bypassed some key areas.

Storage in Northern California's Shasta Lake, which supplies the federal system that irrigates much of California agriculture, is at 104% of average for this time of year. But the level of Lake Oroville, key storage in the state system, is only 60% of normal, lower than it was last spring.

"The State Water Project is not in as good a position as we would like it to be -- and perhaps worse than you might expect based on those fairly good numbers regarding snowpack and precipitation," Cowin observed.

Environmental restrictions on pumping Northern California water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta are lowering the state deliveries by about 10%, he added.

But most of the delivery cuts are because of the drought. "We still are primarily suffering from the dry conditions of the last three years," Cowin said.

Thursday the department increased projected deliveries from 15% to 20% of requested amounts and said there was a good chance they could rise again, reaching 30% to 40%.

The state system is rarely able to give its customers, which include the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, all the water they want. Typically, allocations are about 68% of requests.

"The ethic of using water efficiently in California has got to be the normal course of business and not dependent on the weather forecast," Cowin said.