

California still in drought after storms

Andrew Edwards, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 1-31-10

It's too early to say that California is out of its drought, but water officials are happy to get the snowfall that fell over the Sierra Nevada mountains during the last round of storms.

The California Department of Water Resources announced Friday that field and electronic inspections of mountain snowpack revealed that water content in Sierra snows was at 115 percent of normal levels.

At the same time in 2009, snowpack supplies were at only 61 percent of normal levels.

Current levels are "pretty darn good," but the official word is that Californians are still enduring a drought, Department of Water Resources spokesman Don Strickland said.

"We don't want to sound greedy, but we've had three short years," he said.

Lake Oroville, southeast of Chico, is the State Water Project's primary reservoir. The lake is only at one-third of its capacity and half of its normal level.

State water officials have estimated that the State Water Project would only be able to deliver five percent of requested supplies because of drought conditions and pumping restrictions intended to protect Delta smelt, salmon and other species.

That was the lowest allocation in state history, Strickland said. The Department of Water Resources reported Friday that plans will be recalculated in light of the day's snow survey and other conditions.

Whether the state can escape a drought depends on whether there are additional heavy storms through spring, Strickland said, noting that it's very hard to predict what the weather will bring months in advance.

State officials rely on snowpack to judge water availability, but local agencies are able to use rain to recharge their groundwater supplies.

The Inland Empire Utilities Agency, which provides H₂O to water retailers in the West Valley, was able to store 2,500 acre feet of water during the past storm, spokeswoman Sondra Elrod said.

An acre foot is about 326,000 gallons of water and the term is often used to describe the amount of water a family uses in one year.

Elrod also said it's too early to declare an end to the drought.

"It's going to take a few really wet years for that to happen," she said.