

## Fresno County lakeside communities counter drought with creativity

By Carmen George

Lakeshore — Looking out across now-puny Edison Lake in high country Fresno County, an "eerie" feeling comes over Jim Clement.

The lake's capacity is just 5% of its 125,000 acre-feet of water -- a troubling statistic for the 60-year-old owner of Vermilion Valley Resort. His rustic mountain lodge rests beside the lake at about 7,600 feet in elevation.

For many carefree vacationers, visiting this dwindled body of water has become their first up-close-and-personal glimpse at the state's historic drought, Clement said.

For the past three years, and especially this summer, he is often asked this question: "Why is the lake so low? Are they working on the dam?"

Telling them of the drought, the response is often, "Wow, I didn't realize it was that bad."

But for many mountain residents of lakeside communities, the drought's effect has been crystal clear. Down the mountain at Huntington Lake -- which is holding just 34% of its capacity -- docks and hundreds of boat slips have been beached all summer.

Nearby residents at Shaver Lake had a more promising summer -- their docks and slips still floating -- but they received bad news this week.

On Monday, Cal Rossi, a spokesman for Southern California Edison, sent out a dismaying email to Shaver Lake businesses.

He wrote that the energy company is planning to gradually reduce water levels in Shaver Lake. After Sept. 15, lake levels will "hinder" boat ramp access.

"We encourage boat owners to make accommodations to move their boats before this time," Rossi said.

Shaver Lake powers several hydroelectric plants. This summer, its saving grace is water that has been pumped back into the lake for re-use.

"We had a good summer so far, but it just got cut short," said Greg Powell, owner of Shaver Lake Sports.

But it hasn't been all bad for these rural Fresno County communities. Hardy mountain residents like Stephen Sherry, owner of Lakeshore Resort on Huntington Lake, are looking at the bright side.

For example, the fishing right now is "super good," Sherry said.

"There's more fish in a smaller pond. If you have a bathtub and you empty out half the water, they are in a smaller area -- easier to catch," he said with a smile.

And Sherry has faced his summer plight with creativity.

He decided to host two four-wheel-drive "Rock Crawl" events -- one in early July and another last weekend. About 500 to 600 people attended each time to watch modified Jeeps drive over rocks on the now-dusty lakeshore, Sherry said.

The event was a big economic boost for the area -- especially since the High Sierra Regatta sailing competition was canceled because of the low lake level.

Sherry's business has certainly suffered: No sailboat rentals, cabin rentals "way down," and summer staff reduced by nearly half -- about 30 people instead of 60. This summer was also the first time he's had to take out a loan to support his resort.

But on Wednesday -- dressed in his trusty suspenders and work jeans -- Sherry was all smiles as he ran around his scenic resort, built in the 1920s.

"I never think negative -- to me that's a waste of time," he said. "What you do is, when you have bad times like that, you think of new, innovative ways to make things work. You tighten your belt, have less people, be more productive and have a good attitude."

On Wednesday, a couple of fly fisherman at Huntington Lake were also staying positive.

Fresno residents Bob Papazian, 62, and Jeff Trafican, 65, with Fresno Fly Fishers for Conservation, tried out fishing a new stream running through a dried-up portion of the lake. They caught about a half dozen trout.

They had a good time fishing, but worry about their mountain friends.

"I know some people who have had to truck water in for their personal use, for their residences in Shaver Lake," Trafican said. "I know there are some people who can't get enough water pumped in some of the rural communities."

Looking out across beached docks and boat slips from his store window, Mark Richards, co-owner of Rancheria Enterprises -- a business that rents pontoon boats and snowmobiles in Lakeshore -- said, "All we can do is pray for snow."

Those at nearby ski resort China Peak are doing the same. The resort has been relying more on revenue from events -- such as weddings, mountain bicycle racing and a motorcycle run -- to get through the summer, said Debra Neely, China Peak's chief financial officer.

"The low snowfall was a disaster for us," Neely said. "We did everything in our power to stay open ... it was a historically bad year -- the worst probably in 75 years."

But the number of people utilizing 28 area campgrounds is about the same as it was last year, said Richard Van Duyne, an operating manager for Sierra Recreation, a division of California Land Management, from his campground reservation office near Lakeshore.

Annually, the area sees about 150,000 campers, Van Duyne said.

"I think it's been a surprisingly good year," he said. "There were a lot of people who realized there's more to the area than just the lake. There's camping, there's hiking, there's all the other activities."

But Roy Lofts, a site manager for Sierra Recreation, added, "If we don't get rain this winter, California is going to be one hurting son-of-a-gun. If we don't get a snowpack -- it looks bad now, it will be really, really bad next year."

Back at nearly empty Edison Lake, Clement has been thinking the same thing.

Luckily, Clement diversified his business -- largely catering to hikers coming off the John Muir and Pacific Crest trails - - but he misses seeing Edison Lake full of water and tourists walking its shoreline.

"That's the thing I miss the most -- looking out my window at the bay and seeing kids and dogs playing in the water," Clement said. "Now it's literally a mile and a half of sand with no plant life."

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