

Rain soothes Californians, but state reservoirs in bad shape

By Peter Fimrite

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Photo: Leah Millis / The Chronicle

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Joe Cha, 33, fishes at the new water line at Lake Oroville Nov. 29, 2014 in Oroville, Calif. Despite recent rainfall, California's second largest reservoir is near the 1977 historic low at 26 percent of capacity. "This has been quite the progression," said longtime resident Sharon Smith, who has been walking the dam since she moved to the area in 1997. "It seems like it's happening so fast," she said.

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A "for sale" sign is partially visible in exposed earth that used to be submerged as part of Lake Oroville with house boats sitting idle in the background Nov. 29, 2014 in Oroville, Calif. Despite recent rainfall, California's second largest reservoir is near the 1977 historic low at 26 percent of capacity. "This has been quite the progression," said longtime

resident Sharon Smith, who has been walking the dam since she moved to the area in 1997. "It seems like it's happening so fast," she said.

This video player must be at least 300x170 pixels in order to operate.

The recent storms are doing wonders for the California psyche, but it will take more than a few days of rain to pull the state out of its precipitation doldrums.

Despite the steady patter, the Golden State is still wallowing in one of the worst dry spells in modern history. Just look at Lake Oroville, say the aficionados of *agua*. The water level in the primary reservoir for the State Water Project is lower than it has been in 37 years. In November, the Butte County lake fell below 1991 levels, the second-driest it has ever been.

"We've been flirting with the record," said [Ted Thomas](#), spokesman for the [California Department of Water Resources](#). "It's in nature's hands whether Oroville reaches an all-time low or whether we begin to climb our way out of the drought, but it is certainly a very serious situation."

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The second-largest drinking-water source in California is now holding 914,239 acre-feet, which is 26 percent of its 3.5 million-acre-foot capacity. That's 43 percent of the historic average for the date. It's also 34 percent less water than Oroville had a year ago at this time, when it held 1.4 million acre-feet. One acre-foot is enough water to cover an acre in one foot of water, the amount used by a typical family of four in one year.

The lake's all-time low of 882,000 acre-feet was reached on Sept. 7, 1977. Even if Oroville doesn't break that lowly record, it will undoubtedly take a long time for California to climb out of its parched hole. Experts say snowfall would have to reach 150 percent of normal this winter for California to make up the deficit caused by three years of drought.

"The drought has been unforgiving, and near-record lows at Oroville show just how grim the situation is," said [Terry Erlewine](#), the general manager of the State Water Contractors, the nonprofit association of 27 public agencies that have contracts to purchase water from the state. "Stored water sustains California through dry years, but that water only lasts so long. We need storms this winter to refill our reservoirs."

A key resource

Lake Oroville may not be the biggest water storage facility in the state — the largest is Shasta Lake in Shasta County, part of the [U.S. Bureau of Reclamation](#)'s Central Valley Project — but Lake Oroville is the reservoir most oriented toward urban and industrial uses. It provides water to 29 public agencies, including districts in Alameda, Contra Costa and Santa Clara counties. Together, they supply more than 25 million Californians with drinking water and irrigate more than 750,000 acres of farmland.

Water from the state and federal water projects combined irrigate some 9 million acres of farmland and quench the thirst of 38 million people.

Shasta Lake isn't any better than Lake Oroville. It is at only 23 percent of capacity, the same as Trinity Lake, the state's third-largest reservoir, in Trinity County. California's 12 largest reservoirs are all well below the historical averages for this time of year.

Oroville, which is in the Sierra foothills, is a key indicator of how the state is doing as a whole. It relies almost entirely on snowmelt, which is why climate change is such a worry in California. The snow that melts in the spring and summer in the Sierra contains up to 60 percent of California's water supply. Scientists predict that climate change will shorten winters and cause less snow to fall in the future.

Allotments slashed

The lack of water in the state caused Gov. [Jerry Brown](#) to declare a drought emergency in January. That led to drastic reductions in water allotments — many contractors got nothing — and forced residents to ration water and farmers to leave vast tracts of land fallow this past summer.

Orchard owners have had to pull out thirsty almond trees and dig new wells or deepen old ones. The wells have created a new emergency, further depleting the already over-tapped aquifer in the Central Valley and causing the ground in many places to subside.

As the drought worsened over the summer, agricultural interests and conservationists agreed that something had to be done to quench California's ever-increasing thirst. The question is whether the state should rely on existing reservoirs and conserve more or spend billions on storage projects and pipelines.

Conservationists are battling a proposed \$25 billion tunnel project that would move water around the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the collection point for both the state and federal water projects. They have come up with a laundry list of possible alternatives, including water recycling, groundwater storage and even cloud seeding.

The state contractors complain that federal protections for fish, like the chinook salmon and the endangered delta smelt, have forced reductions in the amount of water they get from the delta. It is an example of how tensions are growing in almost direct proportion to the rate at which the water levels at Lake Oroville are sinking.

Water department officials admit they are feeling more optimistic now that Mother Nature has coughed up some rainstorms.

"We're hoping that these storms mean there will be the reversal of the dry trend that we've had and that we will start to climb out of this deep hole," said Thomas, the California Department of Water Resources spokesman. "We put our order in, but we don't know what's going to be delivered. We're hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst."

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