

California drought weakens, forecasters have 'cautious optimism' for future

By Joseph Serna

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LOCAL L.A. Now



Caption California drought

Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times

Brandon Arthur, 10, crawls out of the goeey muddy tailings left by his father Steve Arthur's water well drill site in Terra Bella.

Caption California drought

Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times

Sunrise illuminates previous signs of life amid the dry, steep banks due to drought conditions at Lake Shasta.

Caption California drought

Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times

Puddles of water are all that remain in some areas of San Gabriel River's West Fork in the Angeles National Forest.

Caption California drought

Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times

Pastel colors at dawn reveal a receding Lake Cachuma in Santa Barbara County.

Caption California drought



Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times

Dusk falls as a lone boater heads out on Lake Shasta near the Lake Shasta Dam. Amid serious drought conditions, Lake Shasta is at only 37% of capacity and is likely to go lower.

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California's drought condition improves after series of December storms
December rain lessens California drought; gives optimism for future, forecasters say

For the first time in five months, a majority of California is no longer considered to be in an exceptional drought, the most severe level possible under federal guidelines, the U.S. Drought Monitor announced Thursday.

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About 32% of California, however – most of it in the Central Valley – remains under the exceptional drought category. Last week the total was at more than 55%.

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“The wet weather finally allowed ample runoff (while producing stream and river flooding) that raised major reservoir levels...in most of northern and central California,” the report said.

“Cautious optimism, but still a long way to go’ would be the very short summary for this week’s California drought picture,” the report said.

The good news is tempered by the fact that the entire state remains in some degree of drought and more than three-quarters of it, about 78%, is in “extreme” drought, the second-highest category available, the report said.

In addition, the state’s major reservoir capacities are still below normal.

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California must receive three seasons of above-average rainfall to get back to a “manageable situation,” said Jay Famiglietti, senior water cycle scientist of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in La Cañada Flintridge.

“We need 11 trillion just to get back to our normal, dry conditions,” he told The Times on Tuesday.

But with the rainy winter season just beginning, the storms have given California a “foothold for drought recovery” and left open the chance to gradually chip away at three years worth of drought, the report stated.

The third storm of the week is predicted to settle over Southern California on Friday.

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