

Rain Eases California Drought Anxiety, If Not The Actual Drought

U.S.



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The drought forced many citrus farmers near Orange Cove, Calif., to mulch their trees because they couldn't afford to keep them alive. Recent rain and new groundwater regulations have eased the crisis, but only slightly.

The small city of Orange Cove, at the doorstep of the Sierra Nevada in central California, was suffering the brunt of the state's drought in April.



The rolling hills around the town are lined with citrus groves, and most people work on farms. As the irrigation canals dried up last summer, so did the economy.

"If there's no water, there's no work," Salvador Perez told NPR at the time.

Farm workers like Perez were being laid off as local farms ran out of water. Groves were pulled up as the citrus trees withered. Taps were running dry. Senior citizens were hauling buckets of water just to fill their toilets.

Orange Cove Mayor Victor Lopez said the drought was ruining the local economy.

"You know one of the most serious things is, I believe, that a lot of the people will relocate, they'll move out of town, and that's devastation to our community here," he said at the time.

2014 has been the [third-driest year in California](#) in 119 years of records. The drought has had a huge impact on people's lives across the state.

But when NPR checked back in with Orange Cove, Lopez said he's breathing a little easier.

"A lot of people did relocate and left us, a lot of people," he says. "But we kept insisting to the people that we were going to be fighting for them, we were going to support them, we were going to be backing them up."

It's still a crisis. But recent rain has eased the situation, and after some delicate negotiations, a bipartisan group of California lawmakers managed to approve an emergency order releasing extra water into a federal canal system for towns like Orange Cove.

"It meant that it saved Orange Cove, because we were totally out of water," Lopez says.

Totally out of water. The city had even made washing a car or watering a lawn a criminal offense.

Orange Cove is one of the hardest hit places, but its problems are not unique. [Mandatory water restrictions](#) have been in effect in most cities across the state since the summer. Gov. Jerry Brown pleaded with Californians to cut their water use by 20 percent.

"Don't flush more than you have to," Brown said. "Don't shower longer than you need to. And turn the water off when you're shaving or brushing your teeth."

Some people listened. Some didn't. The governor had more success with a major change to state law: For the first time, pumping groundwater will be regulated and limited. California is the last state in the arid West to take that step.

It took a crisis: According to federal data, groundwater levels across the Southwest are their lowest since 1949, when the population was much smaller.

"Today we do set in law a framework that has been resisted for a long, long time, since before my father was even governor," Brown said.

Some still resist this drought-coping strategy. For some farmers, pumping groundwater has been a lifeline for crops. A lot of those farmers will wrap up this year with the same anxiety and uncertainty they felt a year ago — maybe worse.

The recent storms put some water in the reservoirs, but they haven't made much of a dent in the drought overall.

"[That] deficit is so big that it will probably take two or three years of above-average rainfall in California to satisfy that deficit," says senior water scientist Jay Famiglietti of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena.

Famiglietti led a team that used satellite imagery and measurements from space to pinpoint exactly how much more water California needs to bring things back to normal.

The answer: [11 trillion gallons](#).

"That's about one-and-a-half times the size of Lake Mead, the United States' biggest reservoir," Famiglietti says.

The recent storms that brought 3 inches here or 5 inches there haven't been drought-busters. But make no mistake, after an otherwise bleak year that rain prompts many to think that things could be worse.

Lopez, for one, isn't complaining.

"Thank God," he says. "Our Lord has been good to us."

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