

Drought threatens to push small Valley cities to the brink

By Mark Grossi

- Fresno's dry spell
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 - Fresno also had its warmest year on record in 2014.
- The drought and records
 - California's three-year drought began in the winter of 2011-12.
 - The calendar year of 2013 was the driest on record for many locations in the state.
 - The calendar year of 2014 was the warmest on record for California.
 - Last winter is considered among the three driest, dating back to the 1800s.

Fresno's dry spell

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Late last year as drought-strained water supplies dwindled, the small city of Huron paid an eye-popping \$57,000 for a small amount of river water that was gone in weeks.

The Latino-dominated city in southwest Fresno County was recently ranked the poorest in California, yet it paid more than 10 times the usual rate for the water.

Officials felt relieved to keep taps flowing for the 6,700 residents. Even better, they say, federal officials have committed to paying for the emergency supply.

But the calendar has turned, and another dry year appears to be dawning. Huron is sweating the same drought problem again.

December storms pounded California cities with above-average rainfall, but the wet weather was a dud in the mountains. The snowpack is less than half its usual size. Hydrologists say more than half the state's summer water comes from the snowpack.

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Even more daunting, a dry pattern similar to last year's settled over the state in early January. Though a small storm was expected in the south Valley over the weekend, the next significant storm for the whole Valley isn't due until Jan. 18 or 19, meteorologists said.

Huron again is scrambling, trying to get public money to drill a \$1 million well.

"We don't have a well," said interim City Manager Jack Castro. "We will need to go down 1,600 feet, maybe 2,000

feet. There's no guarantee of good quality water down there."

It's a nervous January in Huron, Coalinga and Avenal on the San Joaquin Valley's west side. All three buy river water from the federal Central Valley Project. On the east side, the project's small municipal customers include Lindsay, Strathmore, Orange Cove and Terra Bella.

In one of the driest years on record, these small communities wound up with half of their usual allotment. Strict conservation was ordered, lawns turned brown, cars stayed dusty. Bottled water had to be delivered to some dry pockets in some communities.

Some towns had access to well water, others worked out deals with neighboring farmers who were fallowing land.

Coalinga, population 17,000, had leftover 2013 water stored in a reservoir. But the city still struggled with reduced water supplies, said Coalinga City Manager Rene Ramirez.

"This has been one for the ages here in Coalinga," he said. "The city had probably never had a water allocation that small even when they first took water from the (federal) system in 1972."

Coalinga's water conservation resulted in a 27% reduction in use — which was beyond the 20% requested by state officials for all of California.

The small communities survived, but it was not easy. To replace tap water, such towns often have fewer options than cities such as Fresno with 500,000 people or Clovis with about 100,000. The customer base in smaller cities and towns is not large enough to produce the income to drill wells or treat the tainted well water.

The wells in the Tulare County city of Lindsay, population 13,000, have problems with water tainted by a now-banned farm fumigant called DBCP, or dibromochloropropane. The problem is not severe enough to shut the wells down, but the city needs another well, officials say.

Lindsay is trying to secure \$1.2 million in public funding to rebuild an old well that had been shut down in the past.

"We haven't been awarded the money yet," said city services director Mike Camarena. "But water supply is the priority with this funding, so we are hopeful."

Like most officials in smaller communities, Camarena understands his city must pray for snow not only in the nearby southern Sierra, but also hundreds of miles north. It's all part of a far-flung domino effect that came into play last year for the first time.

Here's how it worked: Some west Valley landowners with water rights dating back to the 1800s have been getting Northern California river water for decades after Friant Dam was built. The landowners had swapped their San Joaquin River water for Northern California water. It allowed east Valley farms and small communities to buy water from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

But when the bureau couldn't provide Northern California water to the west-siders, the government was forced to send San Joaquin River water from Millerton Lake to the west side — leaving east-side farmers without water and small cities, such as Lindsay, with only half their allotment. Later in the year, the bureau was able to send a little more water to municipal customers, but none got a full allotment.

Could this scenario happen again? The weather holds the answer.

Steve Johnson, a private consulting meteorologist in the Fresno area, has studied long-range forecasts and the latest data. He said he hopes to see big storms, but he isn't optimistic.

Over the last week, he has seen temperatures above 70 degrees at agriculture weather stations in Orosi and Ivanhoe

in Tulare County. The temperatures are nearly 20 degrees above the average in January.

The steep high-pressure ridge now blocking storms allows more sunshine, higher temperatures and more evaporation from the landscape and reservoirs. A fourth year of drought looms if things don't change, he said.

"There are similarities to last year's pattern," Johnson said. "So far, I'm seeing three possibilities for major storms through early May. If we don't get some good weeks of precipitation, we're toast."

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