

# Winter skips January: 'This just keeps getting worse'

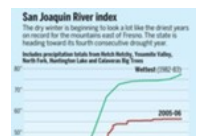
By Mark Grossi



Houseboats are moored on a boat dock wedged between the Pine Flat Lake Marina bank and a surfacing low spot where evidence of California's continuing drought are apparent.

CRAIG KOHLRUSS — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

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- Drought at a glance
  - California heads into fourth dry year with reservoirs lower than 2014.
  - Snowpack is about a quarter of its average size for this time of year.
  - Early February looks like it will be dry, meteorologists say.
  - Delta fish protections changed to prevent early shutdown of water pumping.



One look at the numbers says it all about California's latest drought nightmare: The [snowpack](#) must grow seven times its current size in the next two months just to be average.

After a stormy December, the spigot shut off for January, typically the state's wettest month. In the fourth consecutive dry year, California recorded one of the driest Januaries on record.

After a drought-scarred 2014, water leaders are inspired to start scrambling early for what little water might be

available, working with [several agencies](#) on ideas to allow more supplies to flow out of Northern California while still protecting water quality and the environment.

But if the storms don't get going again, the San Joaquin Valley's nation-leading \$37 billion farm belt may have to live through an even worse scenario than 2014. The federal Central Valley Project's shrunken storage of last year has diminished — losing nearly half the capacity compared to last season, officials said.

“We have less in the bank to deal with debt this year,” said spokeswoman Erin Curtis of the [U.S. Bureau of Reclamation](#), which runs the Central Valley Project, the dominant water project for the Valley.

Meteorologists say early February looks dry, but water leaders, farmers and everyone else cling to the hope that winter will roar back.

REAL-TIME DATA: • [Snowpack](#) • [Reservoirs](#) • [Storm forecast](#)

“It would really help to have at least one good month — a fantastic February, miracle March, an awesome April,” said Ron Jacobsma, general manager of the [Friant Water Authority](#), representing 15,000 east San Joaquin Valley growers who didn't get any river water for irrigation last year.

Consulting meteorologist Steve Johnson in Fresno said December encouraged everyone, but each possibility for stormy weather in January seemed to fall apart.

“This just keeps getting worse,” said Johnson, who forecasts for many farm clients.

Johnson and other meteorologists see a glimmer of hope in a week or so, at least for Northern California. But at the moment, the forecast still looks pretty dry for Central California. Johnson says it will be catastrophic if the stormy season does not pick up again.

The Valley already had a taste of catastrophic last year. There were unprecedented zero Central Valley Project allocations of irrigation water on both the east and west sides of the Valley. More than [400,000 acres of farmland](#) dried up statewide, most of it in the Central Valley.

Poverty-level towns and cities paid [10 times more than usual](#) to keep taps flowing.

And thousands of rural Valley residents lived without indoor plumbing as wells dried up. Many say continued drought and intense groundwater pumping by desperate farmers might leave even more people without water in their homes.

This year, the federal government is reacting differently. A few weeks ago, federal wildlife officials approved a request to increase the limit on the number of protected fish, called delta smelt, that can be killed in massive south [Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta](#) pumps.

The pumps are slowed to protect the smelt when the limit is reached. But the cutbacks can be crippling to farm water supplies in the Valley, especially in dry years.

In January, as the number of dead fish neared the lower limit, the Bureau of Reclamation requested the increase in the limit from 58 to 196.

Environmentalists say it was wrong to roll back protections for the smelt. The delta is a sensitive crossroads for California's two longest rivers, the Sacramento and San Joaquin. They fear the change in restrictions could be extended to other federally protected fish and risk greater loss of wildlife.

They added that the smelt change was a “backroom deal.”

“It's morally indefensible and legally questionable,” said Bill Jennings, executive director of the [California Sportfishing Protection Alliance](#).

Bureau officials said the request to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was a public process that was based on more detailed monitoring and science. They added that the lower limit still has not been breached.

The pumping sends river water south to millions of Valley farmland acres. It also provides water for a special group of [west-side landowners](#), spanning 240,000 acres from Patterson on the north to Mendota. The landowners have water rights dating back to the 1800s, and their needs are at the top of the priority list.

Last year when the landowners could not get enough supplies from the delta, the bureau tapped Millerton Lake to send San Joaquin River water to them. East-side farmers were left with no river water for the first time since Friant Dam was built decades ago.

With no river water, farmers pumped groundwater to keep citrus and other permanent crops alive. East Porterville, along the Valley's east side, lost many wells, and more than 1,000 people were left without water. In all, [more than 900 private wells](#) were lost in Tulare County.

A few weeks ago, there was hope that the scenario could be avoided this year, said Sacramento-based engineer Tom Boardman, who analyzes water supply for the [San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority](#), representing west Valley groups, such as Westlands Water District. But the dry January changed the analysis.

"We're right back on the bubble again now," he said. "The difference is that everyone is jumping on this crisis earlier this year than last year."

Farmers on 1 million acres of east Valley land and 2 million acres of west-side land wait now for the Bureau of Reclamation's initial forecast of summer water deliveries, which is made in mid-February.

In an average year, federal storage in [San Luis Reservoir](#) would be nearing the 960,000 acre-feet capacity. It's closer to a third of that figure this year. Most west-siders are expecting another zero allocation.

It's just as grim on the east side. Rain and snow amounts are similar to the driest season on record. Johnson, the meteorologist, compared this season so far with others over more than a century, and he is not optimistic about the Sierra snowpack catching up.

"More than half the precipitation season is gone again," he said. "I estimate we have 25% chance of catching up on the San Joaquin watershed and about a 30% chance in Northern California."

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