

California has entered fourth year of drought, water experts say

By Steve Scauzillo , San Gabriel Valley Tribune

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Eric Oppenheimer, with the California State Water Board, speaks during the Drought Response Workshop at the Atrium Hotel in Irvine on Wednesday February 25 2015. The workshop features speakers from the Department of Water Resources, the Southern California water Committee, the Metropolitan Water District and the State Water Board(Photo by Keith Durlinger/San ...

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Low water levels at the Stevens Creek Reservoir in San Jose, Calif., on Jan. 22, 2014. Water experts say California has entered its fourth year of drought. (Photo by Nhat V. Meyer/Bay Area News Group/File)



IRVINE >> State water officials are preparing for the fourth straight year of drought and are readying more restrictive water conservation measures under an extension of the governor's water emergency plan.

Rainfall, snowpack and runoff estimates are way below average, indicating the state will continue in drought-

emergency mode throughout the year, state and regional water experts told a gathering of 120 water managers Wednesday at a forum sponsored by the Southern California Water Committee and the National Water Research Institute.

While water agencies and cities have pushed conservation in 2013 and 2014, including more uses for recycled water for irrigating ball fields and golf courses, the missing ingredient is rain water, said Grace Chen, manager of resource planning and development for Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

As a result, MWD drew down reservoirs from a record high of 2.7 million acre-feet in 2012 to only 1.2 million acre-feet of storage remaining today, Chen said. The agency, which provides water to 19 million Southern Californians, meets an annual demand of 4 million acre feet. (An acre-foot equals 326,000 gallons, enough to supply a family of four for a year).

About 1 million acre-feet of ground water — essentially natural reservoirs underground — was pumped last year, Chen said.

“We are hoping for a March miracle but I’m not sure how to make that happen,” Chen said, only half-joking. Depending on rainfall amounts in the next 45 days, the MWD’s board will consider setting a limited allocation for each of its 26 member agencies in April, she said. Likewise, the State Water Resources Control Board will most likely vote to extend the governor’s emergency declaration at its March 17 meeting, said Eric Oppenheimer, SWRCB’s director of Office of Research Planning.

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The state board’s July emergency plan mandates outdoor watering restrictions and prohibits washing your car without a hose with a nozzle. New restrictions being mulled include: an across-the-state limit on outdoor watering to one day a week; requiring recycled water for commercial outdoor watering; leak detection teams and requiring water bills be written in easy-to-understand language.

Oppenheimer, who helps manage the reporting of water use and conservation from 411 urban water agencies, said the staff is recommending changes to the emergency water ordinance but said the specific measures have not yet been listed.

Peter Brostrom, with the state Department of Water Resources, told water managers from cities and retail water districts to dust off conservation plans. “We fully expect to see a lot of changes with these contingency plans,” he said

The most alarming index in the state’s water supply picture is snowpack, or lack thereof. Snowpack in the Sierra is at 20 percent of normal for February, said Jeanine Jones, interstate water manager for the Department of Water Resources, which oversees water resources for the Colorado River and California.

“The words that come to mind are dismal, poor, horrible, abysmal,” she said. “It has been so warm, the snowpack has been melting. This is not supposed to happen in February.”

Melting snowpack supplies California with about two-thirds of its water supply. The runoff forecast from April through July ranges from 27 percent for the Kern River inflow to 46 percent at Oroville, one of the largest reservoirs in the state, according to the DWR. Lake McClure in the San Joaquin Valley remains at 8 percent capacity.

Lack of runoff has kept the allocation from the State Water Project to Southern California at 15 percent, slightly higher than 5 percent allowed last year, a record low.

While December and February rains have helped some, in particular the Folsom Reservoir which is at 100 percent of average for February, storms were too warm, too isolated and too short to break the drought, Jones explained.

California needs much more rain and snow to counter 2014, the fourth driest water year in 114 years of record

keeping, or the years 2012-2014, the three driest in state history, worse than the Dust Bowl years of 1922-24.

Right now, time is running out on the winter rainy season.

“This is not looking good for our water supplies for this summer,” Jones said.