

Water conservation efforts faltered in January

By Matt Weiser

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As soon as the rain stopped, Californians opened up their faucets. At least, that's what the latest water conservation numbers suggest.

Water consumption statewide declined just 8.8 percent in January compared with the same month of 2013 – far below the state's goal of 20 percent – according to data presented to the State Water Resources Control Board on Tuesday. This marks a big setback from the 22 percent savings achieved in December, when rainstorms made it easier to get by with little or no irrigation.

“We rolled into January and we had no rain, essentially, and people ended up turning their sprinklers on,” said Amy Talbot, efficiency program manager at the Sacramento Regional Water Authority. “It's unfortunate because, typically, in the winter months you really don't need to irrigate at all.”

Also Tuesday, the Department of Water Resources reported that the Sierra Nevada snowpack – depending on where it's measured – may be at its lowest level ever recorded.

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The setback in January has water officials worrying how California will cope in the warm months ahead, now that a fourth straight drought year appears likely.

December was the only month in the past year in which California as a whole met Gov. Jerry Brown's emergency drought directive, which called for residents to reduce their water consumption by 20 percent.

“It's hard to sustain a sense of urgency – and emergency – for a longer period of time,” said Max Gomberg, a senior environmental scientist at the state water board, which reviewed the numbers at its meeting Tuesday in Sacramento. “But unfortunately, we don't have a choice. We're simply at a point where we can't count on it raining. It's a dire situation.”

In trying to understand the decline, officials noted that December was wetter than usual across much of the state, perhaps prompting many people to cease watering their yards. But then January wound up as the driest in state history at many locations, which may have led many people to resume irrigating in earnest.

It was also unusually warm in January: 5 degrees warmer than last year in Sacramento, and almost 7 degrees warmer in Fresno, for example.

“I chose to be optimistic in December, even though I knew it was wet,” said water board chairwoman Felicia Marcus. “I'm not quite sure what to make of it. It's important, because we need to figure how much more to ring the bell.”

On Friday, the water board is expected to release a proposal for new statewide water conservation mandates in response to the continuing drought. The proposal will be up for debate at the board's next meeting, on March 17.

The options could range from setting a maximum number of outdoor watering days per week to a ban on outdoor decorative fountains.

The latter idea prompted a backlash at Tuesday's meeting from companies that sell decorative fountains. Mark Fontana of Florence Art Co., a Hayward business that designs and manufactures decorative fountains, noted that

most hold five to 75 gallons of water, and all use recirculating pumps. He said there are more effective ways to save water, such as preventing people from washing cars and driveways.

“If the board prohibits the use of decorative outdoor water fountains, we would most certainly have to lay off a large portion of our workforce, if not close down completely,” Fontana said. “There are many measures this board could take which would be much more effective.”

The backsliding on conservation in January occurred in almost all areas of the state.

The Sacramento River hydrologic region, which has led the state since the board began measuring conservation in July, ended up as a poor performer in January. After consistent double-digit savings each month, the region cut water use only 6.9 percent in January, the third-worst achievement out of 10 hydrologic regions in the state. In December, the Sacramento River region cut its water use 21.4 percent.

The San Joaquin River region, which includes Modesto, cut its water use 11.4 percent in January, down from 18.9 percent in December.

The top performer was the North Coast region, which trimmed water use 17.2 percent in January, a slight improvement from its December result of 15.9 percent.

The South Coast region’s January conservation was 9.2 percent, down from 23.2 percent in December. The region, which includes Los Angeles and San Diego, accounts for about 60 percent of the state’s total urban water demand.

The San Francisco Bay region reduced its water use only 3.7 percent in January, compared to 21.6 percent in December.

All the numbers are compared to the same month in 2013, the baseline year set by the water board.

The California Department of Water Resources on Tuesday conducted its latest survey of the Sierra Nevada snowpack, a crucial water supply for the state. Although a storm over the weekend dropped more than a foot of new snow at high elevations across the mountain range, February as a whole was unusually dry. The snowpack was just 19 percent of average as of Tuesday, according to electronic sensors, and only 17 percent of the average expected on April 1, the normal conclusion of winter.

Only in 1991 was the water content of the snowpack lower: 18 percent of the early March average. Manual surveys of 180 snow courses this year – usually conducted at lower elevations – show the snowpack at just 13 percent of average, the lowest in DWR records for this time of year.

As a result, DWR officials said it is now “almost certain” 2015 will rank as a fourth consecutive drought year in California.

“It was dry everywhere – driest it’s ever been,” said David Bolland, a senior regulatory advocate with the Association of California Water Agencies.

Per-capita water consumption increased about 20 percent in January, according to the numbers presented to the water board. In January, the average Californian consumed 73 gallons per day, up from 67 gallons in December.

The San Francisco Bay region remains the lowest per-capita user in the state, at 56 gallons per day. The Sacramento River region was at 78 gallons per person per day, while the San Joaquin River region was at 71 gallons. The South Coast region was at 75 gallons.

All these numbers are expected to increase as the state warms up with springtime. As a result, officials urge the public to redouble their efforts on water conservation now.

“It is hard to overstate the severity of the drought we’re in,” Gomberg said. “It is really a dismal situation. If you weren’t able to switch to drought-tolerant landscaping last year, or if you weren’t able to fix that irrigation system, now is the time. It really does matter what each person does in his or her household, in the garden, even in a commercial enterprise and industry.”

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