

Valley rain and Sierra snow Tuesday makes small dent in historic drought

By Carmen George

The central San Joaquin Valley received some much-needed rainfall a week after Gov. Jerry Brown announced a mandate requiring Californians reduce water use in the midst of the state's historic drought.

But Tuesday's welcome storm — and another possible next week — will do little to ease the ultra-dry conditions.

"It will alleviate things a little," said meteorologist Carlos Molina with the National Weather Service at Hanford, "but it won't get us anywhere out of the drought."

The storm that moved into the region on Tuesday brought snow below 4,000 feet in elevation and 0.40 of an inch of rain in Fresno as of 5 p.m. Other storm totals during the same period: Lemoore (0.53), Hanford (0.44), Merced (0.34), Los Banos (0.33), Madera (0.32) and Visalia (0.14).

None of it was enough for Fresno resident Crissy Chavez.

"It needs to rain more — it didn't rain enough," the 46-year-old said from Courthouse Park in downtown Fresno while thinking of dying lawns across the city.

In Shaver Lake, resident Dan Wright was very happy about the snow. He measured at least four inches on the ground by Tuesday evening.

"It's breathtaking," said Wright, a manager at Shaver Lake Pub N' Grub. "It's a relief, really. Hopefully it will bring us some good business this weekend. It's been slow with the drought because they closed China Peak (Mountain Resort) early."

Thunderstorms and hail rolled into the Valley on Tuesday afternoon. National Weather Service meteorologist Gary Sanger said hail as large as an inch across was reported in Madera County. Winds also picked up in the afternoon — reaching 40 mph in Pacheco Pass.

Rain showers were expected into late Tuesday night. The heaviest precipitation finished in Fresno by early evening, but Sanger said the south Valley could see around a quarter of an inch of rain by the end of the night.

Snow and rain were blamed for some accidents on highways in the Valley and Sierra, but as of Tuesday afternoon, none resulted in major or moderate injuries, California Highway Patrol officer Scott Jobinger said. An accident south of Tenaya Lodge caused at least a dozen vehicles to get stuck in snow, including a motorhome, and closed northbound Highway 41 on Tuesday afternoon. Tire chains were required at higher elevations along highways 41, 168 and 180 due to snow.

In Yosemite Valley, snow was dusting some trees and meadows by Tuesday afternoon, said park spokeswoman Kari Cobb. National Weather Service meteorologist Jeffrey Barlow said up to 10 inches of snow could fall above 7,000 feet in Yosemite. Farther north, the weather service reported snowfall of up to 2 feet could reach high peaks; whiteout conditions were reported in the Lake Tahoe area. And in Sacramento Valley, several funnel clouds were reported.

Several Bay Area highways were flooded Tuesday afternoon.

Minor calls in Valley

Fresno Fire Department spokesman Pete Martinez said early Tuesday afternoon that firefighters responded to at least six or seven calls of transformer and pole fires, or downed electrical lines in Fresno.

Pacific Gas & Electric Company spokesman Denny Boyles said 544 customers were without electricity across Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties around 2 p.m. Earlier in the day, a larger outage in Madera affected 659 customers, but Boyles said it was only momentary power flickers as repairs were being made.

Some good news: Molina said Tuesday's storm was colder than normal for April, moving in from the northwest — which means snow has a better chance of sticking. However, the storm was expected to have moved out of state, into Nevada and Arizona, by late Tuesday night.

But by mid next week, another cold storm could roll into the central San Joaquin Valley for about a day, Molina said, likely bringing around the same amount of rain and snow.

The April 1 snow survey in the Sierra that Gov. Jerry Brown attended April 1 measured a dismal 5% of historical average.

That same day Brown announced an order requiring the State Water Resources Control Board to implement measures in cities and towns to cut the state's overall water usage by 25% compared with 2013 levels. In accordance with Brown's executive order, citizens should not water lawns or gardens until 48 hours after the rain stops.

Valley skies should clear Wednesday, with daytime temperatures the rest of the week likely to range from the mid-60s to the upper-70s by this weekend.

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