

Even if El Niño delivers rain and snow, drought may never release its grip

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Will the drought ever really end?

California hopes for a sodden winter of El Niño-spawned storms. If they come, our near-empty reservoirs may fill to the brim. But will the rain and snow be enough to replenish underground basins sinking from years of desperate pumping? Will that be enough to coax wary farmers to plant acres of tomatoes and melons again on fallow land? Will farmworkers find jobs close to home and rural residents see water tables rise to reach their wells?

In July, the California Water Commission adopted new water-saving rules: No more grass at new offices and commercial buildings, and new homes can have grass on just 25 percent of the landscaping instead of one-third of the yard.

Will the synthetic lawns and the rock gardens and water-wise Chinese pistache trees remain planted in our front yards? Will we still keep the plastic buckets in our morning showers to capture warm-up water for our roses, cedars and elms?

Or will El Niño wash away our hard-learned, water-stingy habits?

By most expert accounts, a wet El Niño winter will help, but not solve, the Valley's water problems. Drought, it seems, is the new normal.

November gave the central San Joaquin Valley a good start. Rainfall in Fresno exceeded the seasonal average – 1.74 inches, compared with the 0.99 of an inch that typically falls. But El Niño – that warm-water blob in the eastern Pacific Ocean that often signals a wet winter ahead – offers no guarantees.

Since 1950, half the El Niño winters have been drier than normal in Fresno. More than half – 13 to be precise – have provided below-average April 1 snowpacks at Kaiser Pass in eastern Fresno County.

“The conditions (for above-normal rain and snow) are what we'd call ‘favored’ but you can't guarantee anything about climate,” said Mike Halpert, deputy director of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Prediction Center in Maryland.

Location matters, too. Most of the state's water storage is in Northern and Central California, in the form of mountain snowmelt and man-made reservoirs. El Niño may bring drenching rains to Southern California, “but that's not necessarily where we want it to be,” Halpert said.

After four years in drought's tight embrace, Valley residents would like to believe it will end. And it may. Or it may continue for still more years.

Tree ring research finds the San Joaquin River watershed has suffered repeated sustained droughts lasting four years or longer – 35 of them (not counting the current one) in the past 1,100 years. The average length is six years. Some have lasted a dozen years or so.

“Historically, we characterize the climate in the Southwest and California as long periods of dry punctuated by much shorter periods of wet, and sometimes extreme wet,” said Kevin Werner, the Seattle-based Western region climate services director for the National Centers for Environmental Information. “Regardless of El Niño or climate change or

anything else, the climate tends to be one that's highly variable and tends to see a lot of dry days, dry months or even dry years. That's the normal."

Farmers are wising up.

Competition for water continues to grow with California's expanding population and requirements to sustain struggling fisheries. Since 1980 (just a few years after the severe drought of 1976-77), California's population has grown 63 percent, to 38.7 million. In the past, farmers shrugged off a drought and waited for the rains to return. This drought, growers say, is different.

This won't be the last drought we have.

George Goshgarian, a third-generation Fresno County farmer

Half a million acres were fallowed statewide this year – more than 200,000 acres just in the Westlands Water District, the largest water district in the San Joaquin Valley covering vast acres in western Fresno and Kings counties. Across the Valley, wells dried up. As new wells plunge deeper and suck out more water, the ground is sinking. Even city-dwellers let their grass die – and complained about water use on the farm.

"There is a different consciousness now," said Richard Waycott, head of the Almond Board of California in Modesto. "People are looking at the future very differently."

In Del Rey, David Mas Masumoto and his family fallowed 20 percent of their acreage – the first time they had done so in 70 years.

"We always planted every acre," said Masumoto, whose farm is known for its organic tree fruit. "But this time, we had no choice."

Now, Masumoto's daughter, Nikiko, is experimenting with drought-tolerant crops such as olives, figs and lentils. She assumes that "drought will be part of my life. I have to accept that and respond."

If the rains do come this winter, some Valley farmers will allow their orchards or alfalfa fields to be flooded in a test to see if that helps recharge plummeting underground water tables.

The worry is that flooding could harm the plants. But George Goshgarian, a third-generation Fresno County farmer, says the risk to his almond trees is worthwhile if it helps replenish water for the long run.

"This won't be the last drought we have," he said.

The drought has not been without its ironies in farm country, though. In Fresno, Tulare and Kings counties, despite fallowing thousands of acres, growers in 2014 (year three of the drought) still took in record sums, mainly on the strength of big-money crops such as almonds, pistachios, grapes and milk.

Other crops, like leaf lettuce, broccoli, tomatoes and wheat in Fresno County, lost acreage. The acreage reductions are mostly hitting low-value and flexible crops, according to a study by the University of California at Davis.

Less farm acreage means less work. The UC Davis study concluded that more than 10,000 seasonal jobs – about 5 percent – statewide have been lost this year to the drought. One-quarter of that is concentrated in Fresno and Tulare counties.

Five Points farmer Dan Errotabere has fallowed about 1,500 acres on his 5,200-acre spread the past two years. Acreage of tomatoes, garlic, garbanzo beans and melons was cut to ensure his almonds had water. Along with that he cut 10 of his 35 summer jobs.

"Most of our crops are machine harvested," Errotabere said. "Because labor is a challenge, we focus on the crops

that we can do the most with the least.”

That leaves seasonal laborers scratching for work.

With lettuce acreage around Huron substantially scaled back, workers like Maria Lopez are left to look for whatever jobs they can find. The Huron woman recently spent the season driving more than an hour each way to work at a farm near Paso Robles.

She hopes she can get on with that farm for another round of work in January. If that fails, she may be unemployed until April, hoping her meager savings and a food bank can get her family through until then. Maybe by the spring, the drought will lift enough to offer farm work closer to home.

For city residents, the drought has altered longstanding habits and expectations. In many neighborhoods, green lawns are out. The new green is brown – or synthetic, or rocks and drought-tolerant plants. Or just dirt.

Turf farms are dying. Synthetic grass companies are growing, as is water-wise landscaping.

Valley Realtors say homes with plush green backyards are getting frowns from prospective buyers. Builders are making synthetic grass part of the standard package. Real grass? Well, you can ask for it, but you may not get all you want.

The drought “is changing how people live,” said Realtor Jason Farris. “The landscape has changed for years to come.”

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Even cities and schools are rethinking greenery at city parks and public spaces.

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“I envision new parks are going to have less sodded areas,” said Manuel Mollinedo, Fresno’s parks director. “There will be more shrub beds, areas devoted to more of a visual impact than anything else.”

The Clovis Unified School District plans to incorporate drought-tolerant landscaping in its newest school, Virginia Boris Elementary, set to open next year. And recycled water is likely to be increasingly used to irrigate lawns and landscaping at parks and public spaces, including Roeding Park in central Fresno.

Clovis estimates it has lost 110 to 115 trees this year due to watering restrictions – far above the norm of a dozen.

Even the city’s beloved Christmas tree, a coast redwood, fell victim. A heartier deodar cedar, which has withstood the drought better, took its place at Clovis City Hall.

Drought challenges extend beyond each city’s green space.

Pressed by Gov. Jerry Brown, Valley cities have had to enforce stringent state water-conservation standards, sometimes as good cop (persuasion), sometimes as bad cop (fines). But with water use falling as temperatures cool and irrigation schedules change, Valley officials say hitting conservation targets – reducing water use as much as 36 percent from 2013 – will get increasingly difficult. Brown has left the conservation targets in place through February.

Even if Valley cities haven’t met their state water targets, residents are conserving.

Arlyn Presley, a retired teacher from Fresno, began collecting cold water in her shower this summer. The bucket is still there.

“I just figure water’s like gold, like oil,” she said.

But will Californians keep at it once rain gutters gurgle again?

Mark Lubell, a UC Davis professor of environmental science and policy, has been watching conservation efforts. He has been surprised at the results, but believes people won’t stick with shorter showers and fewer toilet flushes past the next wet year.

“If it rains a lot, people will not feel as pressured to reduce their water bill,” he said.

Still, Lubell said, drought is the new normal.

“We know drought is coming, even if it rains three years in a row.”

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