

# Snow not at record lows, but west-side farms get zilch

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By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

Snow surveys this week confirm California's drought is three years old, but it is not among the state's five worst dry spells on record.

At 85% of average on April 1, the snowpack is bigger today than in any season during the 1987-1992 drought -- when west San Joaquin Valley farmers each year got at least some irrigation water.

Yet many west-siders this summer are not supposed to get any federal water, and a few key reservoirs are expected to remain half empty. Why? Laws require more water to flow from rivers to the ocean these days in an attempt to save dying fish species.

"You're in an entirely different water management world now," said state climatologist Mike Anderson in Sacramento. "You have a drought, but you also have regulatory decisions."

The California Department of Water Resources says 2007-09 is the eighth-driest three-year period on record.

This week, early April snowpack measurements all over the Sierra indicated water supply from snow runoff will be below average, but not at record-low levels. Though more snow may fall in the next eight weeks, April 1 is considered the end of the precipitation season.

The National Weather Service predicts a chance of snow showers Monday and Tuesday from Yosemite National Park to Kings Canyon National Park.

At this time of year, snowpack measurements are watched closely by cities, industries, farmers and hydroelectric-project operators -- all of whom depend on snowmelt in summer. More than 60% of the state's summertime water is frozen in the snowpack each year.

The snowpack in mountains above the Kings River is about 85% of average, according to Pacific Gas & Electric Co., which has hydroelectric power plants in that region. A PG&E crew flew in a helicopter Thursday to high-country meadows where snowpack measurement has been done for decades.

A similar measurement ritual took place this week in the mountains above the San Joaquin River. The snowpack in the San Joaquin watershed is also about 85% of average.

High-priority federal customers who get San Joaquin water from Millerton Lake -- including 15,000 farmers and the city of Fresno -- will get 85% of their allotments, according to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

But west-siders, such as Westlands Water District, still are told not to expect any deliveries. The west-side water comes from Northern California, where wildlife agencies are trying to protect the delta smelt, a three-inch minnow.

Giant water pumps at the southern end of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta have been slowed and sometimes stopped so the fish won't be sucked in and killed.

In 1991 and 1992, the state faced a drier time. But Westlands still got 25% of its allotment both years, mainly because many of the wildlife restrictions were not yet in place.

This year, when rivers were running high during a series of February storms, pumping restrictions prevented officials from storing as much water as they would have in the early 1990s.

"If we had this exact same year in the early 1990s before we had the regulatory restrictions, we could have moved 300,000 more acre-feet [into reservoirs]," said Tom Boardman, water resources engineer with the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority. An acre-foot of water is about 326,000 gallons, which is a 12- to 18-month supply for an average family.

Things could get worse, said Maurice Roos, chief hydrologist for the state Department of Water Resources. He said California had two six-year droughts in the last century - the late 1920s to the early 1930s as well as the late 1980s to the early 1990s. It could happen again.

"Are we going to get another three years of drought?" Roos asked. "I think we have to bear that as a possibility."