

Water content 75 percent of normal in Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

PHILLIPS – Predicting whether California reservoirs will be full in the spring isn't something Department of Water Resources officials were about to do Dec. 30 as they took the season's first reading of the water content near Sierra-at-Tahoe.

The numbers are about what they were a year ago – 75 percent of normal. Statewide, the content is 85 percent of normal. More than 140 locations are surveyed.



Frank Gehrke, right, reads the measurement for John Deam to record on Dec. 30. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Frank Gehrke, chief of the California Cooperative Snow Surveys Program, said the trend so far this season is totals are lower in the north part of the state and progressively better heading south.

He wasn't too concerned about the readings along Highway 50.

"Right now things look adequate," Gehrke said as snow gently fell on those standing in the meadow. "This is a typical California start to winter."

"Absolutely" was his response when asked if the state is still in a drought. Gehrke added, "We would need a humongous year or several above average years" to get out of a drought.

By the time April rolls around, water officials will have the task of declaring if this is the fourth year of drought.

With California receiving about 20 percent of its precipitation in January, the numbers could steadily improve or sour dramatically.

What water officials like is when the snow sticks around for a while instead of seeping into the ground right away because better for the groundwater supply for water to be absorbed slow.

The average depth of the snow at the corner of Highway 50 and the road leading to Sierra ski resort was 38.5 inches. The water content was 9 inches. The water content is what's important, not the depth of the snow.

The importance of the water content is that it runs downstream to fill the reservoirs. These reservoirs are storage sheds of sorts for farmers and municipalities for much of the state. These reservoirs are also huge recreation facilities and without water, there's nothing for a boat to float on.

Even though 2009-10 is being called an El Nino year, Gehrke explained there are wet and dry El Nino years. He also said wet years tend to start much sooner than late December.

"There's a whole lot of winter left to go," Gehrke said, cautioning this first survey of the season should not be used to predict how the year will go.