

Winter dam release changes rivers' characteristics

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

Sacramento may be 100 miles from the ocean, but it's still a community defined by water.

The past two weeks offered a powerful reminder, as both the Sacramento and American rivers have swelled substantially in response to a stormy December. Such high flows haven't been seen since the winter of 2005-06.

For some, it's an inconvenience. Parts of the American River Parkway bike path went underwater two weeks ago when releases from Folsom Dam were doubled – to 30,000 cubic feet per second – to make way for upstream runoff. This forced some bicycle commuters to find a detour.

For others, the high flows are a thrilling reminder that a little weather can give our normally glassy-smooth rivers a whole different character.

Dams may control the flow on most Central Valley rivers, but they can't suppress everything Mother Nature dishes out.

"It seems like it's unusual because we've had a fairly long dry spell," said Rob Hartman, hydrologist in charge of the California-Nevada River Forecast Center, a branch of the National Weather Service in Sacramento.

"In reality," he said, "you would expect this to happen several times each winter, and it's not a problem. We're just trending back toward normalcy."

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