

Snow survey leads to drought lifting

By Susan Wood and Brenda Knox

PHILLIPS – The last snow survey of the season is for all Lake Tahoe residents who lamented over shoveling enough to skew the view of the neighborhood while others who chose the slopes to lose sight of their skis and boards.

Snow measurements taken by California Department of Water Resources hydrologists on Wednesday show the water content coming in at 154 percent of average for the Phillips site at the base of the Sierra-at-Tahoe road for this time of year.

The readings amount to 124.2 inches in snow depth and 43.5 inches of water – nearly one foot more water than the site's measurement last year but about one foot less than what would constitute as the big years of 1969 and 1983. And forget the epic winter of 1951-52 – which is honored with much humility at a South Lake Tahoe party every summer.

Essentially, the season has been phenomenal but not record breaking. One would need another 20 inches of water for that.



DWR
hydrologist
Frank Gehrke
takes a snow
measurement

with a longer-
than-usual
pole.

Photo/Brenda

Knox

Still, the readings were large enough to prompt California Gov. Jerry Brown to lift the drought issued by his predecessor three years ago. The winter has also prompted Lake Tahoe ski areas including Squaw Valley among others to extend the season through Memorial Day weekend with a record 700 inches.

"It's been 16 years since we've seen this kind of snow," DWR chief hydrologist Frank Gehrke told Lake Tahoe News.

Overall, the long spine of the Sierra Nevada mountain range brought out water measurements in the snowpack of 165 percent. Electronic readings for the northern Sierra were as high as 174 percent for the April 1 seasonal average.

By contrast, reports on March 1 showed the central Sierra seasonal average at 106 percent. This latest reading was just the tip of the iceberg on summarizing a wild winter that roared over the region in December, cooled in mid January into February and returned with a vengeance in March. Ironically, the "Miracle March" tends to happen in drought years as in the period from 1987-1992.

DWR takes the readings to determine water allocations for the state's 25 million Californians and almost one million acres of irrigated farmland. The state agency estimates it can deliver 70 percent of the requested amount for the State Water Project, the Central Valley's flagship program.

"While this season's storms have lifted us out of the drought, it's critical that Californians continue to watch their water use," Brown said in a statement upon ending the drought declaration. "Drought or no drought, demand for water in

California way outstrips supply. Continued conservation is key.”

The statement serves as a reminder that abundance is one thing. Water management is quite another.

Currently all reservoirs in the state are filled to marks above average, but there’s more anticipated snowpack runoff than what can be stored in the reservoirs. This makes management of the flows more of a challenge.