

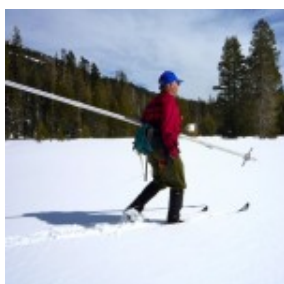
Water content well above average in Sierra Nevada

By Brenda Knox and Kathryn Reed

PHILLIPS STATION – With the amount of snow that has fallen and the sudden meltdown of it, people living in Lake Tahoe know there is plenty of water in that white stuff.

Officials from the California Department of Water Resources made it official Tuesday.

The measurements taken March 1 at the entrance to Sierra-at-Tahoe show 89 inches of snow, 31.7 inches of water content, which is 128 percent of normal. Statewide, water content is 124 percent of normal.



Frank Gehrke takes water samples March 1 near Sierra-at-Tahoe.
Photo/Brenda Knox

A month ago the content at Phillips Station was 125 percent of normal and in December it was 158 percent.

Even though the state is still technically in a drought – that designation is something the governor controls – the readings

are much better than last year when the water content was 107 percent of normal, and in 2009 was 80 percent of normal.

Frank Gehrke, chief of the California Cooperative Snow Survey Program, said the state would be in “pretty good shape hydrologically speaking at the end of the season.”

So much snow was in the field that it was getting stuck in the core of the metal tube he uses for the seven samples. A month ago there was so little snow hiking boots could be worn instead of snowshoes or skis.

For a La Nina year, the amount of moisture coming down has been unexpected. A month ago Gehrke was concerned if the dry January continued, it could be trouble for water users downstream of the Sierra runoff. He acknowledged it has been quite an unusual winter.

“March 1 is a key date, flood control reservoirs can increase storage as of March 1,” Gehrke said. “It’s important to fill reservoirs.”

Typically, snow continues to accumulate at a decent rate through April 1, and then the meltdown begins. The peak runoff is usually in May.

The mountain snowpack numbers are important because approximately one-third of the water for California’s households, industry and farms come from this source.

Location	Elevation	Snow Depth	Water Content	% of Long Term Average
Alpha	7,600 feet	91.7 inches	36.8 inches	131
Phillips Station	6,800 feet	89 inches	31.7 inches	128
Lyons Creek	6,700 feet	101.1 inches	39 inches	153

Tamarack Flat	6,500 feet	Missing	Missing	Missing
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Source: Department of Water Resources