

Dismal snowpack melting away fast with all the sun

By Kathryn Reed

PHILLIPS STATION – While there was snow to survey, there wasn't much. The water content measured near Sierra-at-Tahoe on Wednesday came in at 19 percent of normal.

Statewide, the snowpack water content for Feb. 1 is 37 percent of normal.

The water content as measured by the Department of Water Resources was 3.8 inches near Echo Summit. This compares to 24.8 inches a year ago.



Frank Gehrke with the Department of Water Resources talks water content Feb. 1 near Echo Summit.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

It was deceiving to have Frank Gehrke take the samples along a 500-foot open area just off Highway 50 while snow was coming

down because it gave the perception winter is alive and well in the Sierra.

That just isn't the truth.

South Lake Tahoe recorded 3.88 inches of precipitation for all of January, according to the National Weather Service. Weather gurus are not seeing any love on their models in terms of winter-like weather. And the blips that may produce moisture this month aren't enough to make up for the precip deficit all of Northern California and Northern Nevada are dealing with.

While the National Weather Service said this total was not a record low, the water content comes close.

According to the Department of Water Resources, the Feb. 1 water content was the second lowest on record, with those books starting in 1946. In February 1963 at Phillips Station it was all dirt – nothing to record but zeroes.

Gehrke pointed out that besides the abysmal amount of snow (15.6 inches where he measured Feb. 1) and the low water content, the storm patterns are likely going to create a problem for reservoir managers. This is because the snow is melting faster than usual with day after day of sun.

And he said if the winter progresses with these same storm patterns, the white stuff will disappear even faster.

Reservoirs in California that supply municipalities and farmers are still holding their own after the records set in 2010-11, but if this dry pattern lasts all winter, restrictions could be put in place.

Lake Oroville in Butte County, the State Water Project's principal storage reservoir, is at 107 percent of average for the date and Lake Shasta, the federal Central Valley Project's largest reservoir with a capacity of 4.5 million acre-feet, is at 99 percent of its normal storage level for the date.

Besides the lack of snow likely to affect the whole state in terms of water supply in the coming months, it is impacting the Lake Tahoe economy today.

It wasn't until last weekend that snowmobiling operations started at Tahoe businesses. Kirkwood is the only Tahoe area resort to have its whole mountain open, but with no snow in the forecast for the next two weeks, that status could change. Ski shops are starting to have clearance sales to move merchandise. Snow removal operators may be turning to lawn service soon.

With businesses unable to operate at full throttle it means less operating cash for them, but also fewer employees. South Lake Tahoe's unemployment rate is at 15 percent, while Douglas County's is at 13.8 percent.

Feb. 1 DWR readings:

<i>Location</i>	<i>Elevation</i>	<i>Snow Depth</i>	<i>Water Content</i>	<i>% of Long Term Average</i>
<i>Alpha</i>	<i>7,600 feet</i>	<i>14.8 inches</i>	<i>3.6 inches</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Phillips Station</i>	<i>6,800 feet</i>	<i>15.6 inches</i>	<i>3.8 inches</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Lyons Creek</i>	<i>6,700 feet</i>	<i>21.8 inches</i>	<i>5.8 inches</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Tamarack Flat</i>	<i>6,500 feet</i>	<i>15.2 inches</i>	<i>4.8 inches</i>	<i>25</i>

