

Water content inching up, but still well below normal

By Kathryn Reed

PHILLIPS STATION – “By no means are we in great shape, but we are nowhere near as fragile as we were last month.”

That is the assessment of the water content in the Sierra Nevada by Frank Gehrke. Gehrke, who works for the state Department of Water Resources, was at the base of Sierra-at-Tahoe along Highway 50 on Monday for the penultimate snow survey of the season.

Usually by the April survey talk begins of a diminishing snowpack. This year, the readings keep increasing. Considering the first reading this season on Jan. 3 at Phillips Station Gehrke collected dirt in his instruments, things have improved dramatically.



Frank Gehrke takes a reading April 2 near Phillips Station.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

Still, this location is at 39 percent of its long-term

average, with water content of 11 inches and snow depth of 31 inches. A year ago, the water content was 43.5 inches, snow depth 124.2 inches and 154 percent of normal.

For April 2, 2012, the state is 55 percent of its average. While this is not good, water gurus are staying afloat from the abundance of moisture from winter 2010-11. Lake Oroville, the State Water Project's principal reservoir, is 107 percent of average and Lake Shasta, the federal Central Valley Project's largest reservoir, is at 104 percent of average.

This bodes well as the snowpack traditionally begins to diminish with the start of April because of fewer storms and warmer temperatures increasing snowmelt.

Gehrke was breaking trail on his cross country skis as the media followed alongside. Under the blue sky and sunshine the snow sparkled like diamonds, almost as though it knows it has a value that no banker will trade for a greenback.

Tahoe merchants know snow depths can be measured in dollars. On one of the best ski days of the season it was easy to find a parking spot at Sierra-at-Tahoe. Stashes of powder could be found a day after the storm, while others enjoyed the rarely groomed Clipper run. Even at 10am corduroy was scattered about.

It was an interesting Monday morning seeing how important snow is to so many facets of the California landscape and economy.

Another storm that is likely to arrive tonight in the greater Lake Tahoe area (that could last into Thursday) is good news for the overall water situation in the state. First, it means more moisture. Second, the cooler temps will slow the snowmelt. The longer water stays in its frozen form, the better for storage reasons. It means not needing to irrigate, flooding being less of a concern, and evaporation not occurring as soon.

And it's good news for the greater Lake Tahoe economy. Businesses dependent on snow can hope to salvage a season that has been rocky in so many ways.

Location	Elevation	Snow Depth	Water Content	% of Long Term Average
Alpha	7,600 feet	44 inches	15.9 inches	48
Phillips Station	6,800 feet	31 inches	11 inches	39
Lyons Creek	6,700 feet	52.4 inches	19.1 inches	61
Tamarack Flat	6,500 feet	44.9 inches	13.6 inches	50

Source: *Department of Water Resources*