

Shrinking snowpack may impact electric bills

By Craig Miller, KQED

While much is uncertain about California's warming climate, there is little doubt that it's already changing the fundamentals of how most of us get our water. In fact, the Bureau of Reclamation has estimated that the Sierra snowpack could be reduced by half as soon as a decade from now.

And that has some far-reaching implications that could even show up on your electric bill.

"When you hear people talk about a depleted snowpack, it's because of warmer temperatures and the snow just cannot stay in the hills," says Robert Shibatani, a hydrologist and consultant to numerous government agencies. He says the "hydrograph" for California – the "usual" pattern of precipitation and runoff – is already changing. "There's no question about it," he told me in a recent interview. "That's not an if. It's not even a when, because I can tell you the when. It's happening now."

Shibatani says it's not that we'll get less precipitation, necessarily, but warming temperatures will mean more of it falling as rain at higher elevations. And the relatively steady runoff we've come to count on to fill the reservoirs and spin the turbines throughout the summer and fall will be compressed into the late winter and early spring.

"What it's gonna mean is that we're gonna spill more often," says Einar Maisch, strategic planning director for the Placer County Water Agency. "And that means we're gonna lose generation."

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