

Drought concerns return as state remains parched

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

When Californians suffer under oppressive heat, as they have for weeks, another concern is sure to follow: drought.

Long-term weather outlooks for the Golden State do not provide much reassurance. Although the stubborn heat that gripped the state finally started to ease Thursday, there is zero rain in the forecast.

Drought conditions have worsened across California compared with one year ago and are expected to get more severe through December.

Sixty-nine percent of California is considered to be in moderate drought conditions or worse, according to the National Drought Mitigation Center. One year ago, none of the state was in that condition.

The national drought center bases its outlook largely on soil moisture measurements, but California officials look at drought a little differently, basing it on whether people's water needs are being met.

The state Department of Water Resources is a long way from declaring a drought, saying it depends much more on local conditions and regional demand. But it acknowledges the potential is there.

For instance, most of the state's major reservoirs are at below-average storage levels. California avoided drought this summer because those reservoirs were filled to the brim by a wet winter in the early months of 2011. Such was not the case from January through March of this year, and the surplus is

gone.

Growers in the Merced Irrigation District received a full allotment this season because of carryover in their reservoir. However, next growing season farmers will be relying heavily on runoff from the mountain snowpack.

“If it’s going to be a dry year, it’s going to be a concern,” said Hicham Eltal, deputy general manager of water resources for the Merced Irrigation District. “It would take more water this year than last year to weather a drought.”

Another example is Folsom Lake on the American River, which stood at less than half full this week, with capacity about 81 percent of average for this time of year.

“Groundwater levels are starting to go down a little in some places, and reservoir storage levels are starting to go down,” said Jeanine Jones, interstate resources manager at the DWR. “If this winter is dry, we’ll feel it more.”

Less surface water means more groundwater pumping, which for many has become a way of life.

“In our area most of us have wells that we can depend on,” said Gino Pedretti, Merced Irrigation District board member and El Nido farmer. “There’s a few out here that don’t have enough well water and if there’s a drought, they’ll have to grow a spring crop or just not farm it at all.”

El Niño to return

It’s too early to tell what kind of winter California will have, but indications seem ominous.

During the summer, cities up and down the valley set records for high temperatures and numbers of days above 90 degrees.

Conditions have been so dry and hot that the National Interagency Fire Center announced this week it extended an

“above average” fire warning across Northern California – all the way to the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

It also warned that warm, dry winds could blow across the state from inland deserts this week, rather than from the ocean as usual.

The National Weather Service has declared a weak El Niño to be in play this winter. That means the tropical Pacific Ocean is warmer than normal, a cycle that typically alters climate patterns to produce dry conditions in Northern California and wet conditions in the south part of the state.

In a long-range forecast issued Sept. 20, the weather service said odds favor just that: dry weather through December in Northern California, which happens to be where most of the state’s water supply is stored.

The situation is not preoccupying water managers in the state, said Tim Quinn, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies. They are accustomed to uncertainty, especially this early in the season.

“I’m not hearing a lot of dread at the present time,” Quinn said. “I never paid a lot of attention to the long-term prognosticators. They’re wrong as often as they are right.

“And no matter what they say, you want to be prepared for the worst.”

Merced Sun-Star staff writer Joshua Emerson Smith contributed to this report.