

CA snowpack water content 33% above average

By Kathryn Reed

PHILLIPS STATION – While the state is faring well when it comes to water content from the snowpack, the measurement closest to South Lake Tahoe is just average this time of year.

In the field paralleling the road to Sierra-at-Tahoe, Frank Gehrke with the state Department of Water Resources on Jan. 2 took a series of samples to determine there is 12.1 inches of water content in the 48.6 inches of snowpack. This is 101 percent of average.

Statewide, though, the water content is 133 percent of average.



Frank Gehrke on Jan. 2 measures the water content of the snowpack at Phillips Station. Photo/Kathryn Reed

A year ago on the first survey of the season, Gehrke almost didn't bring his equipment out of the truck. There was one patch of snow to measure. This year snowshoes were required to break trail along the route.

"It's a good, encouraging start, but it's just average," Gehrke said.

While ski resorts rejoice in the immediacy of snowfall and at this point could fare OK if there were an extended break between storms because of what is on the ground, water managers downstream don't celebrate this time of year. It's too early.

It's the April reading that counts most to them because after that the snowfall is negligible. The snowpack fills reservoirs throughout Northern California, which allows water to be sent to points south for drinking and to irrigate farmlands.

According to the Department of Water Resources, the white stuff accounts for about one-third of the water for California households, farms and industry users.

The theory is the snowpack will keep growing between now and the last reading in April. Had this been the April reading, the state average would be at 49 percent.

While the storms in early December brought rain to the Lake Tahoe Basin, they were also filling up reservoirs. This in some ways is a bonus for the water system.

Lake Oroville in Butte County, the State Water Project's principal reservoir, is at 71 percent of capacity, 113 percent of average for the date; while Shasta Lake near Redding, the federal Central Valley Project's principal storage reservoir, is at 73 percent of capacity, 115 percent of normal for the date.

Right now there is a lull between storms, which isn't uncommon in January in Tahoe.

Gehrke said it's hard to find any definitive trends with snowpack and water content totals in this area because there can be dramatic swings from year-to-year. And he wasn't about

to make predictions for what the water content will be like as the winter progresses.