

Lack of moisture triggers early fire season

There was no snow to be found today during the final survey of the season near Echo Summit, which comes as no surprise considering temperatures in the Lake Tahoe area have been running above normal for most of this spring.

Statewide, the snowpack as of May 2 is 17 percent of normal for this date.

Electronic readings show water content in the northern mountains is 16 percent of normal for the date. Electronic readings for the central Sierra show 23 percent of normal water. The numbers for the southern Sierra are 9 percent of average.

While Lake Oroville in Butte County, the State Water Project's principal storage reservoir, is at 103 percent of its average level for the date (86 percent of its 3.5 million acre-foot capacity) and Shasta Lake north of Redding, the federal Central Valley Project's largest reservoir with a capacity of 4.5 million acre-feet, is at 95 percent of its normal storage level for the date (83 percent of capacity), it won't take long for those numbers to change with water users downstream tapping into the supply and normal evaporation with summer's high temps in these areas.



The Upper Truckee Marsh on April 22 is drier than normal. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Already the Department of Water Resources is projecting to deliver 35 percent of the requested amounts of water for SWP customers. Snow normally provides about one-third of the water for California's homes and farms as it melts into streams, reservoirs and aquifers.

Sprinklers coming on in April was a sure sign the ground is abnormally dry in Tahoe.

The average temperature in the Lake Tahoe Basin has been running 10 to 15 degrees higher than normal for this time of year, which just helps to dry things out faster.

However, with the unsettled weather moving in, the mercury will be returning to normal – back to the low 60s.

Even though rain is in the forecast for the Lake Tahoe Basin starting on Saturday and continuing through Tuesday, the amount of wet stuff will not be enough to make up for the dismal snowpack.

The good news with thunderstorms in the forecast is there is still plenty of snow in the higher elevations. This means little chance of lightning starting a fire.

“Once this system moves out of the area, it will give a little reprieve before the start of fire season. But once it starts to heat up, fire season will be here earlier than typical,” Scott McGuire, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Reno, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

For other areas of the state, fire season is in full force. The Santa Ana winds have whipped up multiple fires in Southern California that as of this afternoon were still out of control. Fire is also eating up grasslands in Sonoma and Napa

counties. Fire season usually starts in June in California.

All indicators point to 2013 likely being a bad year for fire.

“Our firefighters have responded to an increased number of wildfires due to the very little rainfall we have received over the past few months,” CalFire director Ken Pimlott said in a statement. As of the end of April, CalFire had responded to more than 680 wildfires this calendar year. This is about 200 more than the average for this time of year.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report