

Tahoe immune from drastic Calif. water rules

By Kathryn Reed

While state water officials scramble to contend with a worsening drought, Lake Tahoe taps are not going to go dry.

Water purveyors in the Lake Tahoe Basin use groundwater or the lake.

And while the lake level is dropping at a time when it should be replenishing, there are so many acre-feet in it that the lack of rain and/or snow would have to continue for quite a few years to impact water users in the basin.

Who is likely to be affected are marina owners and the affiliated businesses when it comes to getting recreational boats into the water and commercial boats to the dock.



While it looks like winter in Lake Tahoe, California remains parched.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

Private well owners could also be impacted as the groundwater is depleted.

South Tahoe Public Utility District is not worried, as its

wells are between 200 and 600 feet deep. The district, the largest water company in the basin, is completely on well water. If need be, another well could be drilled. But doing so comes with a \$2 million price tag.

District staff members will make a presentation to the City Council on March 18 about how the drought is affecting STPUD.

Water from Lake Tahoe flows into the Truckee River at the dam in Tahoe City and then it goes to Nevada. Nevada water users in the Reno-Sparks area are impacted by Tahoe's water level.

The basin is in the Nevada watershed – not California. Because of this the drastic news out of Sacramento on Friday does not affect Tahoe directly.

But the residents of Tahoe will be affected because the drought severely impacts farmers. It means fewer crops will be planted and the price of food will go up. Fisheries are being hurt. The drought is affecting the environment as well as the economy, and it will get worse the longer it stays dry.

Simply put, for most of California the demand for water is greater than the supply.

It was announced Friday that entities that receive water from the State Water Project will get zero water. This is the first time that has happened in the 54-year history of the agency. SWP services 25 water agencies that supply water to 25 million people and approximately 750,000 acres of irrigated farmland.

This decision could be revised if it begins to snow and rain. For now, those agencies will have to rely on well water, local reservoirs and other supplies.

"We are two-thirds through the wet season. The state would have to experience heavy rainfall every other day through May to get back to normal. Even then we would face drought conditions," Mark Cowin, Department of Water Resources

director, said during the Jan. 31 press conference in Sacramento.

The decisions on Friday will affect municipal water users, farmers and fisheries. The goal is to share the pain and not point fingers.

Charlton Bonham, director of the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, said his agency has never been in this predicament.

“It is about making really hard decisions in a real time basis where we may have to accept some impact now to avoid a much greater impact tomorrow,” Bonham said.

There is concern the salmon run is threatened because they cannot get upstream to spawn. Delta smelt and other fish are also on people’s radar as water levels decrease.

Actions that have been taken:

- CDFW restricted fishing on some waterways due to low water flows worsened by the drought. More rivers and streams could be impacted in the coming weeks.
- Gov. Jerry Brown declared a drought state of emergency in January.
- CalFire hired 125 additional firefighters to help address the increased fire threat due to drought conditions.
- California Department of Public Health identified and offered assistance to communities at risk of severe drinking water shortages.

Tom Howard, executive director of the state Water Resources Control Board, signed an emergency order Friday to alter the flow of water from reservoirs. This is so some will be saved in storage if things continue to be dry or get worse.

Public health and safety will play a role in how much is

released; so will the need to keep salt water from San Francisco Bay out of the Delta.

This is the third dry year for California. The last significant drought was in 1976-77. Reservoirs are lower today than they were then. And the snow survey on Thursday revealed a record low for water content at 12 percent. Lake Oroville, the principal State Water Project reservoir, is at 36 percent of capacity when normally it is at 55 percent this time of year. Shasta Lake, California's and the federal Central Valley Project's largest reservoir, is at 36 percent capacity when it should be at 54 percent.

"Today is a stark reminder that we all have to save every drop we can in our homes and places of work. Conservation is always important, but today it's an absolute necessity," Cowin said.

Brown has called on all Californians to voluntarily reduce water usage by 20 percent.

South Tahoe PUD does not expect to ration water this summer. Customers have already been on an odd-even watering schedule. What is likely to change is the district will enforce that policy.

"This summer we expect to up our efforts at water conservation," Richard Solbrig, general manager of STPUD, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "If you look at the bigger picture, water conservation is the right thing to do. We should not be wasting water."

Solbrig said the district is likely to make a more concerted effort to promote the turf buyback program, rebates for replacing old washing machines, education about taking shorter showers, running full dishwashers and turning off the spigot while brushing teeth.

He knows people will start irrigating sooner than usual if it does not rain or snow more this winter.

“If people are not water conscientious and careful, that demand peak will increase compared to the previous year,” Solbrig said.

This in turn means a greater depletion of the groundwater.

Solbrig said for his agency’s needs it doesn’t matter if it rains or snows – both fill the aquifer. But there is no substantive moisture in the forecast.