

Dry ground during final Sierra snow survey

By Kathryn Reed

PHILLIPS STATION – Soft, dry soil. It makes measuring snow rather easy. There is none.

The last snow survey of the season by the Department of Water Resources on May 1 turned up no snow at the field next to the entrance of Sierra-at-Tahoe and little snow at the other surveys.

Statewide the water content is at 18 percent of average.

“We need well above average to replace the reservoir storage,” Frank Gehrke with the DWR said of next winter. And predictions of an El Nino are no guarantee it will bring the much-needed moisture.



Frank Gehrke with the Department of Water Resources stands in dirt for the final snow survey of the season. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The dismal snowpack means the runoff, which is usually robust in May, will be more like a trickle. That in turn means the reservoirs downstream are not going to be replenished.

Those reservoirs are what irrigates much of California's farmland and provide a substantial amount of the drinking water for the state.

Lake Oroville in Butte County is at 53 percent of its 3.5 million acre-foot capacity and is normally at 65 percent this time of year. Shasta Lake north of Redding is at 53 percent of its 4.5 million acre-foot capacity when it should be at 61 percent.

Watersheds at lower elevations are already dry. This has fire personnel throughout the state and much of the West on edge.

"It's going to be quite serious," Gehrke said of the threat of fire.

He added, "There is some evidence of tree mortality because of the past two years." Gehrke said. He expects to see more of that as weather heats up and the state enters its third summer of drought.

And while the state is experiencing a bit of a heat wave this week, no records are expected to be set in the Lake Tahoe Basin. The record high for May 1 in South Lake Tahoe is 78 degrees, set in 1978. The forecast high for today is 73 degrees. Tahoe City's record high for Thursday is 74, set in 1947. The high there is expected in the upper 60s.

For May 2, the South Lake Tahoe record is 73 degrees set in 2004; forecast is for 71.

By the weekend temps will cool down, with Saturday being in the upper 60s and Sunday in the low 60s, according to the National Weather Service in Reno. Highs will be in the low 50s next week with a 10 to 30 percent of precipitation. If snow falls, it will be at the upper elevations and is not expected to impact travel.

While people are starting to irrigate, the state is launching

the Californians Don't Waste outdoor water campaign.

On April 30 DWR released a report showing that throughout California groundwater resources are at historically low levels.

Key findings of the report include:

- Groundwater levels have decreased in nearly all areas of the state since spring 2013, and more notably since spring 2010.
- The greatest concentration of recently deepened wells is in the fractured bedrock foothill areas of Nevada, Placer, and El Dorado counties.
- The Kaweah and Kings sub basins have the greatest numbers of deepened wells in an alluvial groundwater basin.
- Of California's 515 alluvial groundwater basins, 169 are fully or partially monitored under the California Statewide Groundwater Elevation Monitoring (CASGEM) program as of April 15.
- Forty of 126 High and Medium priority basins are not monitored under CASGEM as of April 15. There are significant CASGEM groundwater monitoring data gaps in the Sacramento, San Joaquin River, Tulare Lake, Central Coast, and South Lahontan hydrologic regions.
- Several areas of the state lack a current groundwater management plan that addresses all related requirements of the California Water Code.