

# Satellite to track drought from space

By Marcus Woo, *Wired*

The launch of a small satellite won't fix the the drought in the American West—now entering its fourth year—and it won't change the fact that January was the driest month in recorded California history. But the Soil Moisture Active Passive mission might at least tell scientists and farmers something new about that drought, and maybe how much worse it'll get.

Winds and mechanical issues delayed the SMAP launch for two days, but on Saturday morning a Delta II rocketed it from Vandenberg Air Force Base to about 400 miles above the planet. After three months of “commissioning”—when ground control makes sure all the instruments are working—SMAP will spend three years taking the most accurate readings ever of soil moisture around the world. That's right: It will measure how wet the dirt is. From space.

For understanding water on Earth getting a good handle on dampness is crucial. SMAP can see through atmospheric moisture, plants, and a couple of inches of dirt to measure wetness over an area of about 3.5 square miles.

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