

Nev. water officials stress conservation

By Anne Knowles

RENO – The fourth consecutive year of drought in and around Lake Tahoe is shaping up to be the worst by far.

Snowpack in the Lake Tahoe Basin is down to 3 percent of normal, said Nevada State Climatologist Doug Boyle, during a presentation on the drought at the UNR on Tuesday.

Nearby basins are faring little better. The Truckee River Basin stands at 14 percent, while the Carson River Basin is at 5 percent and the Walker River Basin, south of Lake Tahoe, is at 21 percent.

Boyle said Nevada has so far received less than 3 inches of precipitation, about 60 percent of normal and a three-year trend.



Idle snowplows is becoming the norm as the drought persists. Photo/LTN file

“If you include the year before that, over an entire year of precipitation is missing in many parts of the state,” he said.

Boyle said the forecast through June shows no relief, with

higher than average temperatures and, at best, normal precipitation expected.

Separately, Truckee Meadows Water Authority announced it was asking customers to voluntarily cut back water consumption by 10 percent in order for the water purveyor to save and store up to 5,000 acre-feet, or 1.6 billion gallons, of water for next year.

TMWA outlined guidelines for watering lawns, including watering 4-6 minutes three times on assigned watering days.

John Cobourn, water resource specialist with UNR Cooperative Extension, who was part of the drought presentation at UNR, told Lake Tahoe News homeowners should test sprinkler systems for efficiency.

“It’s not uncommon for lawns to get five times the amount of water they need,” said Cobourn.

He said a simple test is to place empty soup cans, about 20 per 1,000 square-foot lawn, and run the sprinkler system to check for volume and consistency.

If the cans capture varying amounts of water, the sprinklers need to be fixed to ensure even application rather than increasing the water overall.

He said to also check the cans for volume. Lawns should be watered three times a week and the total should not exceed 1.5 inches in the summer.

Boyle and Cobourn were joined by about a dozen other water experts from UNR and the Desert Research Institute discussing various programs and efforts to monitor and forecast the ongoing drought and to find better, more efficient ways to use water.

Water for the Seasons, for example, is a four-year program started about six months ago and staffed by UNR, Cooperative

Extension and DRI. Funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Science Foundation, the program is taking a more holistic approach to water usage.

“How do you integrate data with very specific human behaviors? How do you enhance resiliency?” asked Maureen McCarthy, interim director of Academy for the Environment at UNR.

The program focuses on the Truckee Carson river system, but McCarthy said solutions could be applied to any snowpack-based water system. The program’s staff of 10 is talking to water managers including TMWA, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, Carson Water Subconservancy District and the Truckee Carson Irrigation District.

Next, the group will work with water rights holders such as the Fallon and Fernley farmers served by TCID.

Eventually, a Stakeholder Advisory Group consisting of managers and rights holders will be formed to come up with ideas to more flexibly use water, such as creating consortiums of water users who share rights.

McCarthy is also executive director of the Tahoe Science Consortium, which is finishing up eight years of research funded by the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act. That research includes lake clarity, fuels management, air quality, aquatic invasive species and snowpack and snow dynamics. The research is, in part, attempting to address the question on many peoples’ minds.

“What do we do in the basin if this is the new normal?” said McCarthy.