

No denying drought – barren ground at 7,000 feet

By Susan Wood

PHILLIPS STATION –The state isn't fooling around anymore.

In an apparent precursor to Mark Twain's theory, Gov. Jerry Brown issued a mandate April 1 for South Lake Tahoe residents along with the 38 million other Californians to reduce water use by 25 percent. He did so while attending the water year's last and only recorded bare snow survey. There was nothing to register at the foot of Sierra-at-Tahoe ski resort. This has never happened before at this time of year.

If people don't comply with the state Department of Water Resources' order, it could ultimately lead to fines. The executive order will be monitored closely through metering by water districts.

Beyond incentives and other restrictions, this means significant cuts to large users such as golf courses, campuses and the mass collective of state residents – signaling “a new era” commanding shared responsibility, Brown indicated.

When asked by *Lake Tahoe News* how Tahoe residents should handle the dilemma of watering their yards versus choosing responsible water conservation in what may turn out to be a historic fire season, Brown was sympathetic. He was standing less than 10 miles from the hallowed ground of this region's worst wildland fire – Angora 2007. Many wildland fires start close to concentrated residential areas. Flames can ignite from hot power tools left in brittle brush or from a vehicle or careless smokers tossing a cigarette onto dry terrain.

“What I would tell the residents is now we are embarking on an experiment no one has tried. This will require adjustment. It

will require learning. But this is our new normal. It will take heart. It will take instruction. We have the technology. All we need is the political will. It's somewhat of a burden. And agriculture is already undergoing major cutbacks. But we can do a lot better," Brown told *Lake Tahoe News*, while joined by the state's Water Resources chief Mark Cowin, snow survey monitor Frank Gehrke and a flood of media.



Frank Gehrke with the state Department of Water Resources, left, tells Gov. Jerry Brown, on April 1 how his measuring tool would be used in a normal snow year. Photo/Susan Wood

Is it time for cisterns to be installed in yards? – *Lake Tahoe News* asked Cowin.

Cowin replied there's financial assistance and incentives for programs that encourage more stormwater management and those that replace grass lawns with more natural habitat. The state also suggested funding of rebates for low water-use appliances.

Water districts' role in monitoring resident and commercial water use is critical.

"If they don't perform, there will be repercussions – maybe fines," Cowin pointed out. "It's as bad as it's ever been."

To South Lake Tahoe Public Utility District General Manager Richard Solbrig, a head start was definitely in order. Since 2007, the district has implemented odd-even restrictions on when residents can water, he reminded *Lake Tahoe News* on a phone call. The turf buy-back program has much demand. And the district stands at about halfway complete on installing its water meters for 14,000 customers. At least 2,000 more are scheduled to go in this summer.

If the state wants to truly do some good – more money for the incentives already put into place would represent a welcome mat to Solbrig.

"(The state executive order) really came with no surprises. If the state wants to make a real dent, they'll put a few more thousand dollars into our turf buyback program," he said. There's a waiting list to get on it because the demand is so high.

And agencies such as STPUD, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and the city of South Lake Tahoe have hired a Sacramento lobbyist to closely monitor the situation to maximize the benefit for our region.

The one additional requirement Solbrig noticed is the restriction on watering during a rainfall event and within 48 hours afterward.

"That could be a challenge to enforce, obviously," he said.

The specifics will be discussed at the district's board meeting on May 7.

Restaurants will also be asked to only deliver water to tables

when requested. Hotels will need to implement new laundry frequency programs to guests.

Change. Change. Change. Indeed, the state is entering year four of the drought.

Gehrke illustrated the seriousness of the lack of snowfall by showing the marks on the survey measuring stick that records the water content of the Sierra snowpack. The maximum measurement recorded in 1983 – an El Nino year – sat at the top of the pole with 150 inches. The average is 63 inches. The lowest recorded before this year was 27 inches set in 1977. Last year's measured 33 inches at the meadow located where Highway 50 and Sierra-at-Tahoe Road meet.

The ski resort up the hill closed March 17; its second earliest shutdown. Resort general manager, John Rice, stood in attendance in tennis shoes – not normal attire for the ski season.

Gehrke characterized the latest condition of the drought as “distressing” – especially since in all his years of measuring the state snowpack's water content, Wednesday went down as a first to have bare ground on April 1. At least 5 feet of snow should be covering the ground.

“I think the governor here expresses the seriousness of it,” he said.

Are the state's residents in denial? Have we done enough?

The impression from California's leaders is yes and no.

“We're always in denial. But we want to think about the good, and that's good. But we're making the climate worse at a rapid pace. Steps take more steps,” the governor added.

In other words, there's “rationing” now through the various water districts. And now there's a definitive strategy across a vast state. Brown outlined this order as a proposal in the

overall strategy the state has to combat climate change symptoms facilitated by “billions of tons of chemicals released into the atmosphere” where greenhouse gases are trapped.

“That’s why we have cap and trade and electric cars. This is all not easy,” Brown said. And perhaps not smooth-sailing in the words of Tahoe’s most famous writer Twain: “Whiskey’s for drinking, water’s for fightin’ over.”