

Sandoval creates forum to tackle drought



Gov. Brian Sandoval talks April 8 about Nevada's drought. He should be standing in 3 feet of water, but Washoe Lake is a half mile away. Photo/Anne Knowles

By Anne Knowles

WASHOE VALLEY – Standing on Washoe Lake's dry lakebed, yards from the state park's boat ramp but half a mile from any water, Gov. Brian Sandoval signed an executive order creating the Nevada Drought Forum.

The forum is tasked with finding ways to address the ongoing drought and provide sustainable water resources for the state's citizens, farmers and businesses.

"I'm establishing the Nevada Drought Forum to ensure a path

forward for all Nevadans,” Sandoval said Wednesday.

Anticipating comparison to California, where Gov. Jerry Brown last week signed an executive order mandating a statewide 25 percent reduction in water use, Sandoval was quick to say the two states are not alike.

“Some of the things they’re doing, we’ve been doing for years,” said Sandoval. “I commend Gov. Brown. But Nevada is different.”

When asked, Sandoval conceded he also lacks the same authority to call for cuts, a power that lies with the Southern Nevada Water Authority and the Truckee Meadows Water Authority.

“Nevada water law is very different than California’s,” he said.



It’s hard to see the water in Washoe Lake from the boat ramp. Photo/Anne Knowles

TMWA last week asked its customers to voluntarily reduce water use by 10 percent in order for the water purveyor to save and store 5,000 acre-feet of water for use next year. (An acre-foot will cover 1 acre with 1 foot of water.)

TMWA is also working with the state to secure a loan to build a \$17 million pipeline to transport water between Fish Springs, 40 miles north of Reno, to the Truckee Meadows.

Mark Foree, TMWA general manager, said the water authority is working with its myriad partners to implement the Truckee River Operating Agreement signed in 2008, which will eventually double TMWA's upstream drought storage.

TMWA also has access to some water in Stampede Reservoir, in addition to water in Independence and Donner lakes, something the water purveyor didn't have during the state's worst drought from 1987-1994.

During that time, Lake Tahoe was below the rim for $4\frac{1}{2}$ years, Foree said. He said the lake fell below the rim six months ago and is $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches below it now.

"This is not the worst drought on record. Could it become the worst drought? We'll know more next year," said Foree. "We are not expecting any flow into the Truckee (at Tahoe City) and by the end of May or early June all natural flows into it will probably end."



Lake Tahoe normally provides water to the Reno area via the Truckee River.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

The state engineer, Jason King, has ordered a 50 percent reduction in groundwater pumping in two of the state's basins, orders that have been stayed by the court.

“We have seen significant groundwater declines and if left unchecked, the basins will not be sustained,” Leo Drozdoff, director of the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, said at the forum announcement.

The Truckee Carson Irrigation District, which serves farmers in the Fallon and Fernley area, last month told farmers they would receive just 20 percent of their normal allocation.

SNWA, which relies on the Colorado River, has long worked to conserve water.

John Entsminger, general manager of SNWA, said the Las Vegas area has reduced water use by 40 percent in the last 15 years despite a 25 percent increase in population during the boom before the recession.

“Nevada is the poster child for the country,” said Entsminger. “We’ve shown how you can grow the economy and use less water.”

Despite all that, some didn’t think the governor’s response to the ongoing drought was enough.

“I thought it was a start, but not a very strong one,” Bob Fulkerson, state director of the Progressive Leadership Alliance, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “I wanted to see more action, more recognition of the dire problem we’re in, and more of a commitment to a new way of thinking instead of status quo like ‘we’ll make sure there’s always enough water for anyone who comes’.”

The forum, according to the executive order, will comprise the director of the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources; director of the Nevada Department of Agriculture; state engineer; chief of the Nevada Division of Emergency Management; Nevada climatologist; dean of the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension; and representatives from the Desert Research Institute and SNWA.

DRI announced that its representative would be Justin Huntington, associate research professor of Hydrology.

Sandoval ordered all state offices to conduct an audit of their water use. He also ordered all state agencies with drought responsibilities and all municipal water providers to deliver a summary of their actions to the forum by May 15, which the forum will consolidate and make available by June 15.

The Western Governors' Association Drought Forum, created by Sandoval, is delivering its final report in late June, which the state's agencies and water suppliers will then utilize to make recommendations to the Nevada forum by the end of August, according to the executive order.

The Nevada Drought Forum will have a multi-day summit in September and deliver a final report by Nov. 1.