

# Calif.'s drought divide – rainy north, dry south

By Associated Press

Among the changing red and yellow fall leaves of Yosemite National Park, nature artist Penny Otwell is marveling at the fullest rushing waterfalls and rivers she's ever painted there in autumn. But down in the dry Southern California suburbs, David Cantuna laments the same dead and dying grass in his backyard.

California's historic drought finally is easing in parts of the north, thanks to October rains that were three or more times the norm.

"I've been here 53 years and I've never seen it like this," said Otwell, busy in recent weeks capturing on canvas Yosemite's flooded meadows, brimming rivers and gushing waterfalls that more typically are dry this time of year.

The Merced River "is just bank to bank, which is unusual, and the waterfalls are just – after the rains, they were fabulous," Otwell said as she headed to her studio.

But the five-year drought only is deepening in parts of Central and Southern California, including the 21 percent of the state that remains stuck in the deepest category of drought. In the Orange County city of Santa Ana, Cantuna, a 52-year-old machinist, doesn't even think about turning on his backyard sprinklers anymore.

"The damage is already there," Cantuna says of his forlorn front and back lawns. "There's no reason to use my water right now because everything is dry."

The drought divide leaves California's water managers and

experts striving to finesse conservation messages for two wildly differing situations in the state.

In Southern California, the results have been be wildly differing as well. This fall, the water district in one city, Costa Mesa, hung a banner on its building telling residents they could now water their lawns any day they chose, even as another city, Santa Barbara, banned lawn-watering.

“There’s always a balance in managing the drought message,” said Jay Lund, director of the Center for Watershed Sciences at UC Davis. “Play up the drought too much, and then they see it rain, they think...’Why are they just crying wolf?’”

All of California remains under a state-declared drought emergency. That follows what was the driest four-year span in history in the state. At peak, 100 percent of the state was in drought, and Gov. Jerry Brown ordered 25 percent conservation for cities and towns.

Many farms saw water allotments cut, leading to a rate of groundwater pumping that caused countless rural drinking-water wells to run dry and made the land sink more than 1 foot in parts of the Central Valley. The drought has further imperiled dozens of native fish and other species.

Last month brought a much wetter start to the state’s winter rainy season than usual, after near-normal rain and snowfall in 2015. Officials lifted mandatory statewide conservation earlier this year, but stressed they could clamp down again if the rainy season fails or water use shoots up.

This month the U.S. Drought Monitor’s weekly report said nearly one-fourth of the state was out of drought. That was California’s best showing in three years.

California has the biggest share of its 39 million people in the south, but gets most of its water from the north.