

Snowy forecast balances sketchy water content



Frank Gehrke trudges through knee-deep snow Jan. 3 near Sierra-at-Tahoe to measure the water content. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

PHILLIPS STATION – While the water content of the Sierra snowpack is below average for this time of year, the October rains have reservoirs in California higher than most Januarys, especially considering the state is coming out of five years of drought.

No one is saying the drought is over, but the current situation and short-term weather forecast have officials

cautiously optimistic.

At the Jan. 3 snow survey on Highway 50 in the field near the entrance to Sierra-at-Tahoe the water content was 6 inches, which is 53 percent of average. Statewide, the average is 70 percent. This location is one of the lower ones in terms of elevation. As anyone who lives in the Lake Tahoe area knows, the snow line until now has been much higher.

It doesn't matter if the snow comes all at once or trickles in. The important thing is that the spigot stays on.

"We don't get piddly storms, we get big dumps," Frank Gehrke, who does the snow survey for the state Department of Water Resources, said. "January, February, March – any one of those can produce record precipitation."

For part of December this swath of land was more dirt than snow; proving things can change quickly.

The importance of the snowpack is that it provides water for people and farms downstream mostly in the form of runoff in the spring that is kept in various reservoirs throughout the state.

Lake Shasta, California's largest surface reservoir, is at 118 percent of its historical average for January. This is a dramatic improvement from 2016 when it was at 50 percent of its average. Lake Oroville, the State Water Project's largest reservoir, is at 91 percent of its historical average, while a year ago it was at 47 percent.

The series of storms lined up to descend upon Tahoe will keep adding to what was measured on Tuesday. However, it's not the snow depth that matters, but the water content. What has been falling the last few days is super light, making for incredible powder days, but it does not pack as much water content.