

Bleak results in first snow survey of 2018



Frank Gehrke on Jan. 3 finds little snow to measure near Echo Summit. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

PHILLIPS STATION – A major component of the first snow of the year was missing – snow.

Even so, there was something to measure. On Jan. 3 the California Department of Water Resources recorded an average depth of 1.3 inches of snow in the field adjacent to the entrance of Sierra-at-Tahoe. This equated to a water content of 0.4 inches. This is 3 percent of the long-term average for this location at this time of year.

Throughout California the snowpack is dismal. Statewide, the

snowpack water equivalency is 2.6 inches, or 24 percent of the Jan. 3 average.

Dry brown grass dominated the local field, while patches of snow were intermittent. It wasn't even cold. It felt more like fall than winter.

"There is still a lot of winter left," Frank Gehrke, who conducts the survey near Echo Summit, said on Wednesday. "January, February and into March are frequently productive."

He pointed out how while last January was better than now, it was the first quarter of 2017 that produced the abundance of snow. This is often the case. Still, California traditionally receives about half of its annual precipitation during December, January and February. And December was a dud.

Snow is an obvious economic driver for Lake Tahoe this time of year. But that's not what the survey is about. The measurements that are taken throughout the Sierra are about water content for users downstream – people and farms.

The good thing is that the abundance of moisture last winter has the state's reservoirs still sitting with plenty of water. At the end of December, the state reservoirs were at 110 percent of average for the end of the year. This is the highest since December 2012.

Grant Davis, director of the state Department of Water Resources, was also at the Echo Summit snow survey. He wouldn't talk about his anxiety level at this juncture in the water year, but instead pointed out how the state and feds need to work together to come up with better precipitation information.

He pointed out that a 72-hour forecast is 70 percent accurate, while looking out two weeks the accuracy plummets to 7 percent.

Davis said better seasonal forecasting will be better for water management.

“That is where science needs to go,” Davis said. There is an effort under way to improve medium- and long-range forecasting. This involves supercomputers and new radar to better predict when atmospheric rivers will occur and where they will land.

Michelle Mead with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration was also at the survey. While the region is expected to get some precipitation starting today and extending into the following weekend, there are no big atmospheric rivers on the horizon.

As Davis pointed out, “California’s great weather variability means we can go straight from a dry year to a wet year and back again to dry. That’s why California is focusing on adopting water conservation as a way of life, investing in above- and below- ground storage, and improving our infrastructure to protect our clean water supplies against disruptions.”