

California's Drought Fact Sheet

Back-to-back dry years and low reservoir levels have put California squarely in a statewide drought. State water officials say key reservoirs such as Lake Oroville will dip to record low levels later this fall. Mandatory rationing is in place in certain urban areas, and growers in some of California's most productive agricultural regions are seeing dramatic cuts in water deliveries.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger declared an official drought June 4. He also declared a local drought emergency in nine Central Valley counties due to water shortages. (More information can be found at <http://gov.ca.gov>.)

Runoff Projections

After a bountiful January and February, precipitation came to a virtual stop in March through June, qualifying the four-month period as the driest on record. 2008 saw the sixth driest April-May-June in 114 years of record keeping. Rainfall for the year is about at 75% of average.

The Department of Water Resources says runoff will be low enough to designate 2008 as critically dry on both the Sacramento and San Joaquin river systems.

Reservoir Storage

Storage in key statewide reservoirs continued to drop in June. Lake Oroville, one of the state's largest reservoirs and the mainstay of the State Water Project, is at 49% of average for this time of year. The lake is expected to drop to record low levels by this fall.

San Luis Reservoir, located south of the Delta, is at 40% of average. Some agricultural districts are under mandatory rationing to avoid drawing down San Luis at a rate that would put the earthen reservoir at risk of slumping. Urban water agencies are asking customers to conserve as well.

Total reservoir storage in the Colorado River system remains at roughly half of capacity, reflecting the preceding eight-year drought period.

Court Rulings & Wildfires

In December, a U.S. District Court judge ordered restrictions on water project operations in the Delta to help protect a threatened fish species, the Delta smelt. The restrictions are reducing water deliveries by as much as 30% this year to 25 million Californians. Millions of acres of farmland are also impacted. Another decision by the same judge involving salmon may also affect water project operations in the near future. A recent action regarding long-fin smelt may further tighten the screws.

The state's dry conditions are also exacerbating a very potent fire season. In late June, a lightning storm sparked more than 800 wildfires across the state, burning tens of thousands of acres and filling the air with smoke for weeks.