



REGION: Snow survey disappoints, water cuts likely

Officials say 10 percent to 15 percent water cut likely

By DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer | Thursday, April 2, 2009 8:09 PM PDT [u](#)

So much for the hoped-for sequel to the "March miracle."

In a crucial measurement of snow levels in the Sierra Nevada, state surveyors determined Thursday that the reservoir of frozen water in the state's primary mountain range remains at 20 percent below seasonal averages, meaning it is almost certain that local agencies will order mandatory conservation this summer.

"The likelihood is very great that there will be some restrictions," said Peter Odencrans, spokesman for the Eastern Municipal Water District, which serves 130,000 homes and businesses in Riverside County, including Murrieta and Menifee, after the survey.

Indeed, said Ken Weinberg, director of water resources for the San Diego County Water Authority, which distributes water to San Diego-area cities and water districts, there is nothing in the survey to suggest rationing won't hit the streets come July 1.

"We haven't gotten worse and we haven't gotten significantly better," Weinberg said. "Rather, we're narrowing the range of what the possible cutbacks will be."

Weinberg said it looks as if the authority's allocation from Metropolitan Water District ---- which accounts for three-fourths of the water used in San Diego and Riverside counties ---- will fall in the 10 percent to 15 percent range. He said that will translate into a 7 to 11 percent cut in deliveries to cities and districts.

But the county water authority, Eastern Municipal and other regional distributors are all waiting to see what Metropolitan will do on April 14, when it is scheduled to decide whether to slash supplies for the third time since the mid-1970s.

Metropolitan pipes in water from the Sierra Nevada and Rocky Mountains, and is the primary supplier for a vast region of 20 million people stretching from Ventura to the U.S.-Mexico border.

In Thursday's next-to-last measurement of the season, the state reported that conditions have not improved since the end of February, the last time surveyors strapped on skis and headed up into the hills around Lake Tahoe to see how deep the snow was.

There is still one more measurement scheduled for May 1. But with about nine-tenths of a typical year's snowfall having fallen by now, state officials say there is little chance that storms will bury the Sierra and turn this into a normal year.

"We're not expecting a whole lot more rain or snow from this point on," Odencrans said.

Officials throughout Southern California had been praying for something like the "March miracle" that drenched the region in the spring of 1991 and eased one of the worst droughts in state history.

Besides missing out on a spring drought-buster, the state is grappling with unprecedented restrictions on pumping from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, the place where the melting snow goes before it is pumped into the 444-mile State Water Project aqueduct and shipped south.

And the state's big reservoirs are still low "following two very dry years," said Amy Norris, a spokeswoman for the California Department of Water Resources in Sacramento.

"We don't have enough water to meet the demands of agriculture, urban areas and the environment," Norris said.

The snow levels don't tell the whole story of the water that is actually on the ground.

While the snowpack is 20 percent thinner than it usually is, the amount of water expected to run off the hills and into reservoirs this spring and summer is likely to be 30 percent less than usual, said Elissa Lynn, senior meteorologist for the Department of Water Resources. She said that is because runoff depends partly on rain in lower areas, and rainfall totals have been even more disappointing than the snowfall.

Lynn said the state will issue its official runoff forecast Wednesday.

That forecast, coupled with the latest snow survey, will serve as the basis for Metropolitan's anticipated decision. Bob Muir, a spokesman for the Los Angeles-based agency, said a committee will discuss April 13 whether rationing is necessary, and the district board will vote the next day on whether to cut supplies.

The county water authority considered jumping the gun last week and moving to mandatory conservation early. But its board decided to hold off until Metropolitan makes its decision. The authority board will take up the matter again April 23.

Odenrans said Eastern will consider what to do on April 15.