

DWR calls drought 'most significant in state's history': Drought dry Mt. Shasta

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By Tony D'Souza

Siskiyou County, Calif. - A drive along the I-5 corridor between Mount Shasta and Redding will quickly let even the casual observer know that California is experiencing a severe drought. The sight of a bare Mount Shasta and the exposed banks of Shasta Lake serve as stark and constant reminders of the situation unfolding throughout the North State.

In a statement on its website, the Department of Water Resources calls the drought of the past two years, "the most significant water crisis in California history." The drought is also arguably the biggest factor in the wildfires that made this year's "the worst fire season in California history," according to Governor Schwarzenegger and CalFire.

Intensifying disputes over bottling plants and dam removal in our area are symptoms of water, climate change, and drought, local environmentalists say; these issues will become increasingly important to planning decisions in Siskiyou County.

The severity of the current water crisis was first outlined by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger on June 5, when he declared the drought official, and underscored in early September when state officials unveiled a "drought water bank" to prepare for the possibility of a third dry year in a row.

In declaring the drought, Gov. Schwarzenegger said, "This drought is an urgent reminder of the immediate need to upgrade California's water infrastructure. There is no more time to waste because nothing is more vital to protect our economy, our environment and our quality of life... Water is like our gold, and we have to treat it like that."

Driest spring in 88 years

The drought declaration was the first since 1991. This year saw the driest spring in 88 years, with many of the state's largest reservoirs currently nearing a third of their capacity. Not only was rainfall slight this year, but according to the DWR, the final survey for 2008 conducted in May measured snow levels at "just 67% of normal for the date, statewide."

"Snow depth and water content have declined since April," the DWR statement accompanying the survey results continued. "Much of the water content is being absorbed by parched soil as a result of last year's extremely dry weather. March and April 2008 combined are the driest in the northern Sierra since 1921, the first year that records were kept. Water runoff into streams and reservoirs is only 55

to 65 percent of normal... Storage in California's major reservoirs is also low because of last year's dry conditions."

In releasing the survey results back in early May, DWR director Lester Snow said, "Today's conditions further underscore the need for immediate action to solve California's water supply and delivery problems. We must take immediate steps to protect the Delta ecosystem, conserve more water and develop additional groundwater and surface storage facilities to meet our future needs." The summer only saw a continued lack of precipitation, and the eventual rationing of water by some downstream and southern California communities and utilities, most notably the East Bay Utility District and the Long Beach Water Department.

Drought water bank

To prepare for the possibility of a dry 2009, the DWR announced the "drought water bank," which will facilitate the relocation of 600,000 acre feet of water from the north of the state to the south. Under the program, water-rich sellers in the north, including Sacramento Valley farmers who can create a surplus of water by idling crops, will sell their excess water on the open market to water-thirsty cities and farms in the south. The DWR will collect a fee for "pumping the water to its destination," the Sacramento Bee's Matt Weiser reported in September. The DWR will also "...rank buyers according to need. Cities with water related health and safety problems will get first dibs, with farm crops a lower priority. To qualify, urban buyers must have a conservation program adopted to cut normal water use by 20 percent."

This is to avoid a situation where, as the DWR's Snow explained, "...farmers selling water so people can hose off their sidewalks."

By moving pro-actively and quickly to address the drought – Schwarzenegger declared the drought this year when water levels were still higher than at Governor Pete Wilson's 1991 declaration – state officials hope to staunch some of the losses suffered by the economy this summer in the form of "plowed-under" crops and delayed housing and business projects.

Sheri Harral, the Bureau of Reclamation's Public Affairs Specialist at Shasta Dam, while conceding that BOR officials are "concerned" with the situation in a phone call last week, also was eager to let people know that not everything is as troubling as it may seem at first glance.

"We're at 147.23 feet from the crest at Shasta Lake. The reservoir is 31 percent full," Harral explained. "But we've been lower before. 147 is not good, but it's not the worst. The lowest we've ever been was 230 feet below the crest in 1977."

"What people don't understand is that when we get average rainfall, the reservoir fills quickly," Harral continued. "It kind of looks like something from a space movie right now, the emptiness of it, all that red dirt. We get a lot of questions whenever

the water level falls this low. For the last 16 years we have had excess water. People have gotten used to seeing that. When the reservoir looks like this, people start to panic a little because they don't remember 1977. The purpose of this facility is to prevent flooding, but we're also here for years like this. The dam is doing it's job...We still have 1.5 million acre feet, there is still a lot of water here... 90% of our water is from rain, 10% is from snowmelt. We're hoping for an average rainfall. Even in 1977, the reservoir filled the very next year."

In a call just before press-time on Tuesday, Frank Christina, National Weather Service observer in Mount Shasta, said that the seven consecutive months of drought conditions experienced locally are scheduled to get a reprieve as early as this Thursday, with rain forecast through the weekend, he said.