

Voluntary 20 percent cut in state water consumption sought

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Water leaders today urged Californians to make every effort to cut water consumption by 20 percent this year because of the growing likelihood of a third straight drought year.

The state today held its water delivery forecast for the year at just 15 percent of contracted amounts. It is very rare for that forecast to flat-line, rather than grow, as winter unfolds. It means all state water contractors -- mainly cities from the Bay Area to San Diego -- will likely impose mandatory water rationing soon, if they haven't already.

Even worse was the forecast by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which operates Folsom and Shasta dams. It told agricultural contractors both north and south of the Delta that, for now, they can expect zero water deliveries this year, which has never happened. Its urban customers can expect only half of normal supplies.

Both state and federal allocations could grow if the weather cooperates. But officials urged the public to brace for a historically dry year.

"We're dependent on nature right now," said Donald Glaser, Reclamation's regional director.

Despite storms last week that dumped more than 10 feet of snow in some parts of the Sierra Nevada, the state has a long way to go to recover from a dry start to the winter -- not to mention two preceding dry years. The crucial Sierra snow pack remains at just 74 percent of average for the season so far.

Lester Snow, director of the state Department of Water Resources, said state climatologists estimate there is only a 10 percent chance the snow pack will reach normal levels in what remains of the winter season.

"You've got to think about water as a precious commodity," he said. "It is relatively easy to reduce your water use by 20 percent. We need to do that now."