



Media Release

El Dorado County Water Agency Implementing Drought Action Plan *Agency Drought Plan Guides Actions*

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With the driest calendar year on record in 2013, and a record-setting dry and warm January in 2014, the El Dorado County Water Agency is working to ensure the county has continued access to safe, reliable water supplies now and for the future. The agency was established in 1959 as a long-term planning organization that leads, assists and participates in securing water rights for El Dorado County and works to ensure the continued reliability of local water supplies. General Manager Dave Eggerton said that drought preparedness is an essential element in long-term water supply planning for El Dorado County. For that reason, the agency adopted a Drought Plan for the county in 2007, which is guiding its actions today.

Background:

California is now entering its third dry year. Reservoirs are low, groundwater is being dangerously overdrafted in other areas of the state, some private wells are running dry, and how long drought conditions will last is unknown. Weather experts say that, while important, the precipitation in our region that is falling in early February will make only a small dent in our huge water deficits. "The situation is serious," said Dave Eggerton. "We don't know if this is a multi-year drought or a mega drought that lasts for 10 to 20 years or more. We do know we have to take action."

There is evidence of prolonged drought from many years ago. At Fallen Leaf Lake, on the west side of Lake Tahoe in El Dorado County, an underwater Yellow Pine forest was discovered by John Kleppe, Professor Emeritus at University of Nevada, Reno in the 1990s. Scientific testing indicated a drought period lasting from 850 to 1150 A.D., and suggested other lengthy droughts before and after. Droughts in the last century have been much shorter.

On Jan. 17 Gov. Jerry Brown declared a state of drought emergency for California. Brown called on state officials to take all necessary actions to prepare for water shortages, and called on local water suppliers and cities to implement their water shortage contingency plans. Brown urged on all Californians to voluntarily reduce their water use by 20 percent.

Also on Jan. 17, the secretaries of U.S. Agriculture, Interior and Commerce announced that areas in 11 states, including 27 of California's 58 counties, were designated primary disaster areas due to drought.

Similarly, the California Department of Water Resources announced on Jan. 30, "Not only was 2013 California's driest calendar year on record going back to 1895, but this month may go into the records as the driest ever January." The rainfall at the end of the month was miniscule, amounting to only a few hundreds of an inch. The second Water Supply Index forecast of Water Year 2014 was done on Jan. 30. The Department of Water Resources reported that statewide water content of the Sierra snowpack is 12 percent of average for this year and 7 percent of the average April 1 measurement. In the Central Sierra (El Dorado County), measurements are 15 percent of normal for Jan. 30 and 9 percent of the April 1 average.

Going forward, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Climate Prediction Center forecasts that drought conditions will persist or intensify in California and most of the western states through April 30. Some relief may be seen in southern California.

Comparison to Drought of 1976-77:

Most California water officials harken back to the 1976-77 water years. In that period, the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys and the Sierra Nevada mountains to the west were the most severely affected. Statewide, during the water year Oct. 1 through Sept. 30, in 1976 runoff was 47 percent of average. In the 1977 water year, it was 22 percent. The melting cycle started early. On March 1, snowpack water content was about one-half of normal. Peak accumulation was in mid-March, and by April 1 the snowpack water content was the lowest on record at about one-third of the measuring sites.

Today, water stored in reservoirs during the last wet year, 2011, has been depleted over the past two years. Folsom Lake, with a capacity of nearly a million acre feet (977,000), is currently holding 162,617 acre feet, or 17 percent- the lowest it has ever been this time of year. In fact, lake levels are approaching the lowest ever experienced in the fall of 1977 at approximately 140,000 acre feet.

Yet, compared to 1976-77, the situation going into 2014 is in some ways very different:

- The major water transfer systems are aging. Shasta Dam, at the north end of the Central Valley Project (CVP), on the Sacramento River, was completed in 1945. Oroville Dam, the head of the State Water Project (SWP), on the Feather River, was built in 1967. Folsom Dam, on the South Fork of the American River, was finished in 1955. The systems include pipes, canals, pumps, hydroelectric, and other facilities.
- Waters originating in the Sierra Nevada, including the upper watersheds of the American and Cosumnes Rivers in El Dorado County, provide more than 60% of the state's developed water supplies, benefiting communities, farms and ecosystems across the state. Much of this water passes from north to south through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, with impacts on the largest tidal estuary on the West Coast of the Americas. The future of the Delta, and its water conveyance facilities, ecosystems, and local communities, are the subject of intense debate as the Bay-Delta Conservation Planning process proceeds in earnest.

- Demand for water continues to grow. The U.S. Census reports that in 1950, California’s population was 10.6 million. In 1970, there were 20 million. As of July 1, 2013, California has 38.2 million. Since 1950, California’s population has doubled, and doubled again. The California Department of Finance forecasts California will be home to 60 million people by 2042.
- The two statewide water systems, CVP and SWP, were built during a time when the major considerations were demographics—how many people and where— and engineering—what is feasible to build at what cost. Since the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act and the California Environmental Quality Act in 1970, protection of endangered and threatened species has become an increasingly significant factor in the design, construction and operation of water facilities across the state and has in many ways changed the operations of the CVP and SWP.

Local Response:

The County Water Agency’s drought response is directed to assisting local purveyors that provide public water supplies and aiding people outside water service boundaries who are dependent upon groundwater from private wells for consumption and irrigation. Local purveyors El Dorado Irrigation District (EID) and Georgetown Divide Public Utility District (GDPUD) are feeling the effects of the drought as lake levels at Jenkinson Reservoir at Sly Park and Stumpy Meadows Reservoir are each at approximately 60 percent of total capacity and not filling as would be expected at this time of year. Private well owners are also experiencing the effects of drought with areas of declining well production and some incidence of failure.

The Water Agency supports the efforts of local purveyors to implement drought preparedness projects that conserve water and make facilities operate more efficiently. Such projects include leakage reduction, ditch and reservoir lining, waterline replacement, and pursuing additional surface and groundwater supplies for drought protection. In addition, the Water Agency is leading coordination efforts between purveyors in responding to the drought; pursuing state and federal assistance for local drought response efforts; and sharing information with the community and local stakeholders. The agency also supports the efforts of local agriculturists to extend groundwater supplies. Through the Irrigation Management Services program farmers receive precise soil moisture data to calibrate the timing and duration of each irrigation event to achieve greater water use efficiency.

These and other efforts are guided by the Water Agency’s Drought Plan and are performed in coordination with the drought response plans of each purveyor. “We are all working hard together to reduce the impacts of this drought and prepare for the future,” said Eggerton. “We ask everyone’s cooperation.”