

## U.S. NEWS

# In California, Drought Plays Out Unexpectedly

By JIM CARLTON

HEMET, Calif.—As the Golden State endures a three-year drought, residents of semiarid Southern California are mostly being asked to voluntarily conserve water. In typically wetter Northern California, residents are faced with mandatory rationing.

In the battle for water supplies in the state, where the south has traditionally been characterized as an endlessly thirsty drain on water from the north, this turnabout is the result of years of preparation and billions of dollars of infrastructure improvements.

“Out of necessity, we’ve really tried to almost drought-proof our region,” said Rich Atwater, executive director of the Southern California Water Committee, a non-profit water education group in Los Angeles. Southern California agencies have invested \$12 billion in water-supply improvements since a 1987-91 drought triggered widespread rationing and galvanized the region into coming up with a better safety cushion, officials say.

Reservoirs in the south around Los Angeles are brimming, groundwater basins remain comfortably stocked and recycling and conservation programs have freed up abundant reserves. The region’s water supplies are in such good shape that, so far, most local water districts are merely asking residents to conserve.

Much of Northern California, by contrast, is in a state of emergency: eight mostly rural communities face possible drinking-water shortages; rationing has been imposed in some Sacramento-area communities that depend on Folsom Lake, which has shriveled to just 33% of its capacity as of March 2; and prime farmland is being left fallow in the Central Valley, where many growers have been told they will get no new water shipments for irrigation.

The impact of the drought reverberates beyond the state’s borders. Because California boasts a bigger agricultural sector than any other state, the drought could lead to higher produce prices nationally. As a hedge if conditions don’t improve, the California Department of Water Resources on Jan. 31 said it would for the first time ever halt distribution of state supplies this year to 25 million urban customers and nearly a million acres of agricultural land.

While the state is still in a drought emergency, some relief has arrived. The first significant statewide storms in months drenched California last week. Also, the north will soon get help from emergency legislation announced Feb. 19 by Gov. Jerry Brown and top Democratic legislators, which is aimed at accelerating funding of local and regional projects to increase water supplies. That bill passed the Legislature Feb. 27 and was signed



The Chrisman pumps, in the background, are part of the state’s system for redistributing water.

## North vs. South

### Northern California

- ◆ Eight mostly rural communities face drinking-water shortages.
- ◆ At least 19 water districts have imposed mandatory water rationing, most in recent weeks.
- ◆ Local reservoirs are generally low. The Sacramento area’s Folsom Lake, for example, is at just 33% of its capacity.

### Southern California

- ◆ No community faces a possible drinking-water shortage.
- ◆ At least three districts have mandatory rationing, most imposed years ago.
- ◆ Local reservoirs are generally high. Diamond Valley Lake, for example, is about 75% of capacity.

by the governor March 1.

Until those projects can bear fruit, the drought offers a lesson in resource preparedness. Southern California has invested billions of dollars in recent years to expand its infrastructure to hold, transfer and recycle water while increasing conservation. Spending on water projects in much of the

north, meanwhile, has been far more sporadic and less ambitious, officials say.

Southern California is essentially a desert area where water has to be transported from hundreds of miles away, while Northern California has the mountains where the snow that falls meets much of the Golden State’s water

needs.

“Because water is generally more plentiful up here, I think we have taken it for granted,” said Marjie Pettus, city manager of Healdsburg in Sonoma County’s wine country, which on Jan. 21 imposed water rationing. Some larger Northern California districts, such as in San Francisco

and San Jose, have also spent heavily securing water reserves.

Also, unlike in the more populous south, which is generally served by large regional water agencies, many water agencies in the north are smaller and less able to spread the costs of large projects, said Jeanine Jones, deputy drought manager for the California Department of Water Resources.

Lack of local storage for water imported from Northern California and the Colorado River was a major issue, said Jeffrey Kightlinger, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which supplies water to 19 million residents. In 1991, the agency had access to about 300,000 acre-feet in storage of the 2.5 million it provided that year. An acre-foot is roughly enough water for a family of five for one year. Today, it has expanded that capacity to about 5 million.

Meanwhile, many of the smaller agencies the Metropolitan Water District supplies have boosted water resources themselves. Riverside County’s Eastern Municipal Water District, for example, has invested \$55 million over the past five years to produce for delivery 35,000 acre-feet a year of recycled water at local treatment plants—a quarter of the supply for the 768,000 residents it serves, said spokesman Kevin Pearson.