

Blame it on the (lack of) rain

[By Ryan McCarthy/Appeal-Democrat](#)

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At Collins Lake in the Yuba County foothills last month, Tony Ward had never seen lower water levels.

"I've been here 19 years," said the operations manager for the Browns Valley Irrigation District. "It was about as low as I've seen it."

A late December rainfall boosted lake levels by about four feet at the site off Highway 20 near Oregon House — but a dry January has followed and now the next months will tell the story of regional water supplies in a state in an ongoing drought.

"One year we had the 'Amazing April,'" Curt Aikens, general manager of the Yuba County Water Agency, recalled of heavy rains that have also led to what's been called the "March Miracle."

The rest of this month is unlikely to represent any rescue.

"I looked at the 15-day forecast," said Ward. "It shows no rain for the next 12 days."

But the wonders of weather mean a dry January doesn't promise more of the same for the next month.

"It can flop back to record rainfall," Ward noted. "No one knows."

What is known that during a drought the Yuba-Sutter area, near the Sierra snowpack and above the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, is a relatively good place to be. Adequate water supplies are reported for Marysville and Yuba City.

And that more months of little rain statewide could accelerate the crunch that some say California faces after decades of adding millions more residents but not the reservoirs to provide them with water supplies.

"You hear," Aikens said, that "if you want to set up a perfect storm we're on the path."

Issues include levels at some existing reservoirs reaching all-time lows and environmental restrictions impacting the Delta, through which much of California's water flows, Aikens recounted.

Last May, after a severe drop in the Sierra snowpack, Don Schrader, then a member of the Yuba County Water Agency, said another dry year would bring serious statewide water shortages.

"It could get pretty ugly," Schrader said at the time. "This is what everybody who knows anything about California water has been predicting for a long time." "'Dam' has been a dirty word in California," he added. "We have environmental groups who would love to tear down

dams rather than build new ones."

Schrader said Wednesday that water shortages loom unless heavy rainfall occurs the rest of this winter.

"We're facing the worst of all worlds," he said. "The state and particularly agriculture has to brace itself for little or no water."

Whether this winter will be a third dry season in a row is not yet known.

"It's too soon to tell," Aikens said. "We won't get a good read on the water year until early April."

Neill Mitchell, who has 250 acres of prunes and walnuts south of Yuba City, agrees with Schrader's assessment that a day of reckoning is due for California water policy amid the drought conditions.

"We haven't done a darn thing to address the reservoir problems," Mitchell said of the state not adding new water supplies. The drought has also dramatically decreased water supplies, said Mitchell, who was at Lake Oroville last week and said of the site that, "It's not a lake. It's a mud puddle."

The coming crunch in California will alert people to the water policy problem, he said.

"I like to see a good side to everything," Mitchell said. "We're going to get some people off their butts."

The lack of rainfall, said Louie Mendoza, agricultural commissioner for Yuba County, may affect owners of the 24,000 acres of prune, walnut and peach orchards in the county.

"If we don't get any more rain they're going to have to start irrigating those orchards," Mendoza said.

Continued drought conditions also affect the 191,000 acres of rangelands in the county. Without adequate rain landowners have to buy supplemental feed such as hay because livestock are unable to graze on the dry lands, Mendoza said.

Dry times for Mid-Valley

Yuba-Sutter rainfall totals through Jan. 14:

2009 — 5.95 inches

2008 — 7.14 inches

2007 — 4.59 inches

2006 — 13.40 inches

Normal — 11.85 inches

Normal season — 20.96 inches

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