

Deep snowpack to give Californians more water this summer

By Don Thompson
ASSOCIATED PRESS

April 2, 2005

SACRAMENTO – The Sierra Nevada are blanketed with a third more snow than normal. reservoirs, low enough to show bathtub rings the past few years, are filling. Southern California, after a multiyear drought, has had its second-wettest year on record.

While the Pacific Northwest has had a dry winter dampened by a recent series of storms, most of California is swimming.

"What's encouraging is the northern Sierra, except for the very far north, is starting to get decent coverage after lagging (Southern California) all season," said Frank Gehrke, snow survey chief for the state Department of Water Resources, as he headed out yesterday to take snow measurements south of Lake Tahoe. "It tapers off as you go north. I think it's probably too little, too late for the Northwest – Oregon and Washington."

More than 50 water agencies and utilities are measuring snow by hand at 265 locations this week, augmenting 117 remote sensors that track snowfall. The department will use the data to set the official summer water forecasts next week, though a final survey will be conducted in a month.

Snow levels statewide were 37 percent above normal. They were 24 percent above average in the northern Sierra; 35 percent above normal in the central Sierra; and 53 percent above average in the southern Sierra. It was 41 percent above average at Echo Summit, where Gehrke took his readings.

California gets more than a third of its drinking and irrigation water from Sierra snow, while snow-fed hydroelectric plants produce about a quarter of the state's power.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation says the heavy snowpack will let it provide all the water needed by wildlife refuges and farmers and cities north of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Farmers south of the delta are now set for 65 percent of their allocation, though that could increase.

The Department of Water Resources raised its allocation yesterday from 60 percent to 70 percent for the 29 water and irrigation districts that buy water through the State Water Project. Near-record snowfall in December and January has been followed by periodic

storms. But the state was in relatively good shape last year as well, until an early thaw sent much of the snowmelt unused into the ocean.

"It looked like we were going to have a repeat of last spring – but that lasted only about a week," Gehrke said of an early March warm spell. The weather has since cooled, and storms keep rolling in.

Don Thompson, San Diego Union Tribune