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Forget the floods, California



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emergency drought rules

Jeff Daniels | @jeffdanielsca
2 Hours Ago



Marcio Jose Sanchez | AP

Rachel Turner uses a kayak to access her flooded home Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2017, in Felton, Calif.

Despite a deluge of rain and snow this winter, California regulators on Wednesday moved to extend the state's emergency drought rules.

"While we're certainly well situated compared to past years, we've learned that things can change suddenly," Felicia Marcus, chair of the State Water Resources Control Board, said at a hearing Wednesday in Sacramento. "Warm rains in the spring or high temperatures can quickly degrade snowpack, even though we have a pretty sturdy snowpack in many places."

The state water board voted to keep the emergency rules in place statewide through the spring, which means prohibitions on wasteful water practices such as watering lawns and landscapes when it's raining. It also continues to bar local governments from penalizing homeowners who let lawns go brown.

The current regulations were set to expire Feb. 28. The board also plans to review the rules again in May at the end of the rainy season.

The action comes as Northern California is essentially free of any drought conditions and key reservoirs north of the state capital of Sacramento are nearing capacity and releasing water to handle more rain that's expected. Yet other areas, including Southern California as well as portions of the central and coastal regions, are still considered to have various levels of drought intensity.

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"After four to five years of drought in the state of California, it is refreshing to finally see us turn the corner, so to speak, and be on the right path towards improvement in all sectors of drought in the state," said Brian Fuchs, a climatologist with the National Drought Mitigation Center in Lincoln, Nebraska.

The northern two-thirds of California and even some coastal regions in the south have seen anywhere from 200 percent to 400 percent of normal rainfall in just the past seven days, according to the National Weather Service in Sacramento. The heavy precipitation this month follows a string of tropical storms in **January**, which produced flooding and mudslides in northern and southern portions of the state.

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Also, the snowpack (essentially water in storage) in the Sierra Nevada mountain range is at its **biggest in 22 years**. The snowpack is important since it supplies about 30 percent of the state's water needs particularly in the warmer months when there's little or no rainfall.

California put water restrictions in place in 2014 after Gov. Jerry Brown declared a drought state of emergency but officials last year lifted some strict rules, including the requirement of 25 percent cutbacks in urban areas. Last May the state adopted a **stress-test approach** to water conservation, meaning a more flexible approach that asked water suppliers whether they had enough water supplies for three years of dry conditions.

Wednesday's vote by the board will require a conservation mandate from only those suppliers that cannot pass the stress test. The state previously indicated that 343 out of 410 water districts did the stress test, and at hearing one official confirmed those that took the test essentially passed.

Under the **extended regulation**, the state also will allow urban water suppliers that didn't take or didn't pass the stress test (and have been subject to state-set standards) an opportunity to update their analysis.

The **U.S. Drought Monitor** last week showed about 50 percent of California being designated at some level of drought intensity. Just three months ago about 75 percent of the state was listed as having some intensity of drought. While nearly 2 percent of the state is still in "extreme" drought — the second worst category — that's down from almost 43 percent three months ago and about 64 percent one year ago.

Last week's monitor showed "moderate" and "severe" drought conditions remain in parts of Central and Southern California as well as a small patch of "extreme" drought in three counties of Southern California — Los Angeles, Santa Barbara and Ventura.

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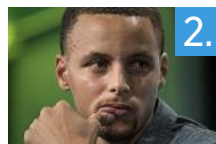
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The next monitor report and California drought map is scheduled for release early Thursday and is likely to show more areas clear of any drought or dryness. The monitor is prepared weekly by several agencies, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln as well as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"With the new map that comes out [Thursday] morning, there are going to be further improvements that were made in California this week," said Fuchs, who is one of the regular authors of the monitor.

Specifically, improvements are likely to show up in the southern half of the state where there's still water supply problems. Also there are aquifers that haven't fully recharged after years of drought conditions.

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aquifers and well levels still lingering for quite some time just because of how slow those deep water supplies take to replenish," said Fuchs.

One area still feeling the drought effects is the state's Central Coast region between Monterey and Santa Barbara counties.

For example, Lake Cachuma — historically a key water supply for Santa Barbara — is still under 15 percent capacity as of this week. The city of Santa Barbara this month is preparing to fully restart a [desalination plant idled](#) in the 1990s that will provide the community with drinking water.

Meantime, north of the state capital, communities such as Red Bluff along the Sacramento River and tributaries experienced flooding Tuesday and conditions could worsen Thursday and Friday with more rain forecast by the National Weather Service. Flooding also is happening this week as the San Lorenzo River overflows between Santa Cruz and Felton.

Also, the Russian River near Guerneville is rising again, causing more flooding in the wine growing region of Sonoma County. Portions of California's Napa wine region have experienced flooding and mudslides too, and nearly an inch of additional rain was forecast from the coming storm system.

"The effects of the rain are only on erosion, which has been tackled right after the previous harvest by winterizing the vineyards by putting down hay," said Jean Hoefliger, a winemaker at Alpha Omega winery in St. Helena, a community in the heart of the Napa Valley. He also said the snowfall in the Sierra is important because it "will melt in spring and provide us with spring and summer water, which we need the most."

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