

# SACRAMENTO BEE ARTICLE

## California, get ready for water cutbacks. Cities, farms receive grim warning about supply

**[BY DALE KASLER](#)**

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UPDATED MARCH 23, 2021 04:24 PM

The rainy season is nearly over, there's been no "March miracle" and the possibility of parched lawns and fallowed farm fields is growing.

State and federal officials issued remarkably bleak warnings Tuesday about California's summer water supplies, telling farmers and others to gear up for potential shortages.

The Department of Water Resources, in a rare turnabout, actually lowered its forecast of the deliveries it expects to make to the cities and farms that belong to the State Water Project. In its new forecast, the agency said its customers can expect just 5% of contracted supplies. In December the expected allocation was set at 10%.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which supplies water mainly to farmers through the Central Valley Project, said that due to worsening hydrological conditions, the 5% water allocation promised to its customers south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta "is not available for delivery until further notice."

While stopping short of officially declaring a drought — a [task reserved for Gov. Gavin Newsom](#) — the announcements served notice that California is almost certainly heading into one. The Department of Water Resources said it filed a revised "drought contingency plan" with the Department of Fish and Wildlife; the document will serve as a kind of road map for managing water supplies and monitoring impacts on endangered species.

"Californians — we know drought, we know how to manage it," Karla Nemeth, director of the Department of Water Resources, said in an interview. "This is going to test us. We do have the tools that we need."

She said an official drought declaration is still likely a year away, depending on how much it rains and snows next winter, but already "we've had a few conversations about that." Even without a declaration, state officials want "to start troubleshooting and reaching out to communities so they don't run into ... water supply emergencies," she said.

The signs of drought are many.

Rain and snow have been [well below average](#), and the state's network of reservoirs are holding less water than usual. [The U.S. Drought Monitor](#), a weekly snapshot created by the federal government, shows that drought conditions have enveloped 91% of California's landmass; more than a third of the state is in "extreme" or "exceptional" drought.



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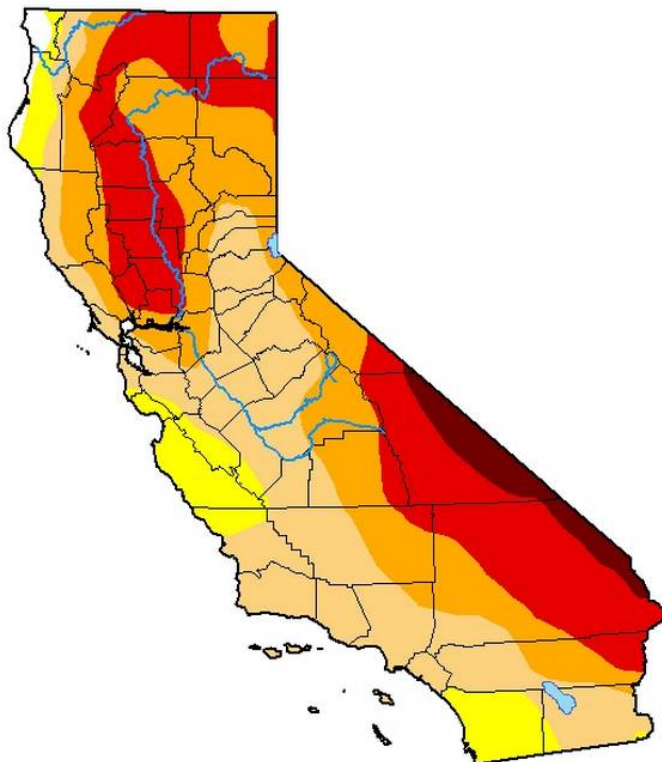
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### U.S. Drought Monitor California

March 16, 2021  
(Released Thursday, Mar. 18, 2021)  
Valid 8 a.m. EDT



#### Intensity:

- None
- D0 Abnormally Dry
- D1 Moderate Drought
- D2 Severe Drought
- D3 Extreme Drought
- D4 Exceptional Drought

The Drought Monitor focuses on broad-scale conditions. Local conditions may vary. For more information on the Drought Monitor, go to <http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/About.aspx>

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[droughtmonitor.unl.edu](http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu)

Meanwhile, the State Water Resources Control Board announced late Monday that it had mailed [early warning notices](#) to 40,000 farmers, municipal officials and others, telling them to prepare for potential shortages.

“Start planning now for potential water supply shortages later this year and identify practical actions you can take to increase drought resilience, such as increasing water conservation measures, reducing irrigated acreage, managing herd size, using innovative irrigation and monitoring technologies, or diversifying your water supply portfolio,” the letter read in part.

Joaquin Esquivel, chairman of the water board, said the letters are intended to notify water-rights holders that their legal rights to pull water from rivers and streams could be limited.

“It’s the reality that conditions are so dry that curtailment is a possibility and we’re wanting everybody to be on notice,” he said.

Esquivel said a drought-emergency declaration by the governor would make it easier to curtail users’ water rights, but curtailment can occur even before the governor acts. In the last drought, some [water districts sued the state](#) to protect their water rights, although the state was still able to use curtailment orders to keep millions of gallons of water in the rivers.



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Water shortages would affect rural and urban Californians alike. Notably, 19 million urban Southern Californians depend on the State Water Project for roughly a quarter of their annual supply.

“The state’s deteriorating water supply conditions reinforce the need to maintain the lower water use we have seen among Southern Californians since the last drought,” Jeff Kightlinger, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, said in a prepared statement.

During the last drought, considered among the worst in recorded history, farmers idled millions of acres of land while most urban Californians were ordered to limit their lawn watering. Former Gov. Jerry Brown [declared an end to that drought](#) in spring 2017, following one of the wettest winters ever.

This year California is enduring its second consecutive dry winter. The Sierra Nevada snowpack — whose spring melt is ordinarily crucial to replenishing the state’s major rivers and reservoirs — is 37% thinner than normal for this time of year. Shasta Lake, the state’s largest reservoir, is one-third emptier than usual for this date, while Lake Oroville is about half as full as it should be.

Rainfall has been about half what it should be in Northern California, and the handful of light storms in recent weeks hasn’t helped much. Sacramento, for instance, has received [just 1.29 inches of rain](#) this month; the average is 3.02 inches. For the most part, rain and snow stop falling around April 1.

The meager water projections are especially troubling in California’s \$50 billion-a-year agricultural industry, which supplies 100% of the nation’s processing tomatoes, 88% of its strawberries and 57% of its peaches — to name a few commodities that rely largely on the state’s farmers.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, in a letter to Gov. Gavin Newsom, recently [declared 50 counties as natural disaster areas](#) due to drought, making farmers eligible for emergency loans and other assistance. Farmers in neighboring counties also are eligible, Vilsack said, meaning farmers in all 58 counties can receive the aid.

The San Joaquin Valley, the heart of California agriculture, is especially on edge. Valley farmers rely on Central Valley Project deliveries that are pumped through the Delta — the fragile estuary whose declining fish populations mean that pumping operations often get scaled back.

In a dry year, the Delta bottleneck can make a bad year even worse, and now the Bureau of Reclamation has put its 5% allocation on hold to south-of-Delta customers.

“We’re bracing for some hard times,” said Joe Del Bosque, a prominent melon and almond grower in western Fresno and Merced counties.

If water allocations don’t improve, “it’s going to be very dire,” he said. “It reverberates through the whole Valley.” Del Bosque said he’s worried about having enough water to plant the organic cantaloupes and other melons he sells to Safeway, Whole Foods and other grocers.

“Also it’s important to keep our people working,” Del Bosque said.