

NO SEVERE DROUGHT THREAT IN CALAVERAS



Unusually low water for midwinter exposes the old Hogan dam, allowing anglers Wednesday to troll among its remains in New Hogan Reservoir. Dana M. Nichols/THE RECORD

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SAN ANDREAS - The drought is very visible to Calaveras County residents. They see the enormous bathtub ring at New Melones Reservoir every time they cross the lake on Highway 49. They see the still-brown hillsides where green grass is normally thick by mid-winter.

And folks who go angling at New Hogan Reservoir can now troll among the normally submerged remains of the original Hogan Dam.

But at least for this year, most people here will still get water when they turn on their faucets.

"If we get real about our conservation, I think we will be OK this year," said Mitch Dion, general manager of Calaveras County Water District. "It is the second and third years that become pretty scary for us."

Not everyone in the region is so fortunate. The California Department of Public Health last week placed Jackson Valley Irrigation District near Lone on a list of 17 water agencies in danger of facing a "severe shortage" within 100 days. Jackson Valley Irrigation General Manager Steven Fredrick did not respond to telephone messages asking him to comment.

Calaveras County's population and its demands for water are relatively small, so remaining water supplies in reservoirs such as Spicer Meadow on the upper Stanislaus River and New Hogan on the Calaveras River are ample to meet needs for this year, said Larry Diamond, assistant to the general manager for CCWD.

Spicer Meadow Reservoir, with a capacity of 189,000 acre-feet, had about 75,000 acre-feet of water stored as of Wednesday, Diamond said. But Calaveras County Water District only uses about 1,300 acre-feet a year to serve its customers in Arnold and Copperopolis.

An acre-foot is enough water to cover one acre one foot deep. It is generally considered enough water to serve two urban detached family homes for a year.

Even allowing for electric power generation water releases from Spicer Meadow by the Northern California Power Agency, there's still plenty for drinking water customers, Diamond said.

Similarly, New Hogan Reservoir on the Calaveras River had about 93,000 acre-feet Wednesday, far less than its capacity of about 317,000 acre-feet. Although Stockton also uses water from New Hogan, Diamond said CCWD needs only about 3,500 acre-feet a year for customers in the Gold Creek, La Contenta and Rancho Calaveras subdivisions near Valley Springs. That's far less than the 31,000 acre-feet to which CCWD has rights on the Calaveras River.

One of Calaveras County's smallest communities, Sheep Ranch, could conceivably face water shortages later this year, depending on the weather the rest of the winter, Diamond said.

White Pines Lake in Arnold, which supplies water for Sheep Ranch, did go dry several times during the 1987 to 1992 drought, Diamond said. Fortunately, Sheep Ranch has fewer than 50 customers, which made it possible to simply truck in drinking water, Diamond said.

Diamond said West Point should be able to get enough water, thanks to purchases from Schaads Reservoir, which is owned by the smaller Calaveras Public Utility District.

Unfortunately for Calaveras Public Utility District customers, however, the utility has no way right now to deliver Schaads Reservoir water to them, said Calaveras PUD General Manager Donna Leatherman.

Instead, CPUD serves customers in San Andreas, Mokelumne Hill and Paloma with water from Jeff Davis Reservoir on the South Fork Mokelumne River.

Leatherman said that Jeff Davis is the lowest ever for this time of year, although she was not immediately able to calculate how much water the reservoir currently holds.

According to California Department of Water Resources records, Jeff Davis has a capacity of 1,800 acre-feet. Leatherman said the district provides between 900 and 1,100 acre-feet of water per year to its customers.

"I am hoping that we are able to get some more water out of these next rain systems and put us in a better position," Leatherman said.

Leatherman and other water utility leaders here have called on residents to take voluntary conservation measures.

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