

DRIEST YEAR ON RECORD

DROUGHT FEARS INTENSIFY WITH LITTLE PROSPECT OF RELIEF AHEAD



Some farmers are being forced by lack of rainfall to irrigate orchards that typically would not require water this time of year, like these walnut orchards east of Stockton being watered Monday.

CRAIG SANDERS/The Record



The lack of rain is also hitting cattlemen hard. The foothills east of Stockton are still largely dried out, forcing many to buy expensive hay and other food for livestock that normally would feed on grass.

CRAIG SANDERS/The Record

By **Alex Breitler**
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STOCKTON - In the end, it wasn't even close.

When the Champagne flows at midnight today, 2013 will officially become the driest calendar year on record in Stockton, along with much of the rest of California.

Even a decent storm likely wouldn't have made up the difference.

Stockton's weather this year was typical of a desert community such as Palm Springs, Phoenix or Winnemucca, Nev. We got nearly as much rain last December as we did in the 12 months that followed it.

And with talk of drought increasing, it may be an ominous sign that Stockton's previous driest year on record was 1976, toward the start of the most severe dry spell the state has experienced.

Those who manage our water don't measure success in calendar years. January, February and March could turn things around, making 2013 a statistical anomaly.

But that's of little comfort at the moment to people such as Duane Martin Jr., a Valley cattleman struggling to keep his cows healthy on brown, dead fields.

"We have probably written off any profit this year because of the hay we've had to buy to get through it," Martin said. "Now we've got next summer to think about, too. We're in survival mode, just trying to live to play the game another year. And it's getting kind of depressing."

The snowpack, a valuable source of water for much of the state, ranges from 11 percent of normal in the north to 32 percent of normal in the south. Reservoirs upon which San Joaquin County relies are in better shape than others, but some are still well below average.

While communities dependent on woefully low Folsom Lake are facing water-use restrictions, Stockton is in better shape thanks to the new Delta drinking-water plant that went online in 2012. Even if water is not delivered from New Melones Lake this year - officials say they won't know until February - the city has several other sources, and there are no plans at the moment for aggressive water restrictions.

"I don't see a need to get everyone alarmed," said Bob Granberg, assistant director of the city's Municipal Utilities Department. "Our ratepayers have paid for this reliability, and we have it."

Indeed, it may be farmers more than urbanites who feel the effects of drought, at least for now.

Some farmers are irrigating orchards that would normally not require water this time of year. Wheat, a \$20 million crop in San Joaquin County in 2012, has been slow growing because of a lack of moisture.

And then you have cattlemen such as Martin. He has shipped some of his cattle from dry California to Nevada, Idaho and Oregon, where more forage is available. And for his cows here at home, he is using expensive hay as a substitute for pasture, hoping rain will turn his fortunes around in 2014.

Drinking-water ponds for the cows have dried up, and springs have stopped flowing. On Monday, Martin was installing solar pumps to run water systems that haven't been used in 30 years.

"We're spending a lot of damn money that we're never going to get back," he said.

But if he didn't make that investment, his cows wouldn't grow so fat and would fetch far less money when they're sold.

"People sit down and have a steak, and they have no idea what it took to get that on their plate," Martin said.

In addition to water worries, the lack of storms passing through our area could mean a continuation of recent poor air quality. Wood burning in Stockton has been prohibited 19 of the past 20 days, an unusually nasty streak.

Long-term climate predictions do not suggest a high likelihood for average or above-average rainfall over the next three months, at least in the southern half of the state.

Forecasters did offer a glimmer of hope Monday when they said there are signs that the stubborn high-pressure system locked in over California could begin to break down by the end of next week. That could open the door for storms.

"But we can't be very confident at this point," said George Cline, a forecaster with the National Weather Service in Sacramento.

"The only hope we have is January and February are typically the wettest months of the year," he said. "Hopefully we'll start getting something going here. But right now, it's pretty grim."

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Living in the desert?

Stockton got a record-low 4.59 inches of rain this year, a full inch drier than the previous record.

That is essentially a desert climate. Consider:

- Palm Springs averages 5.64 inches per year.
- Bishop averages 5.11 inches per year.
- Phoenix averages 7.97 inches per year.
- El Paso, Texas, averages 9.67 inches per year.
- Winnemucca, Nev., averages 8.22 inches per year.
- Bakersfield averages 6.39 inches per year.
- The hottest and most arid place in the United States, Death Valley National Park, averages 2.28 inches per year. But in unusually wet years, Death Valley has received more rain than Stockton got in 2013.

http://www.recordnet.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20131231/A_NEWS/312310321&c id=sitesearch

The driest year

Stockton saw its driest year on record in 2013, and it really wasn't that close. Many cities throughout California can lay claim to the same inauspicious achievement, raising concerns about an impending drought.

