

With storms skipping state, nearly half of California is back in a drought

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Photo: Rich Pedroncelli, Associated Press

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Frank Gehrke of the state Department of Water Resources checks the snowpack near Echo Summit with federal meteorologists Courtney Obergfell (left) and Michelle Mead.

The T-shirt-wearing temperatures and lack of winter rain have combined to push nearly half of California into all-too-familiar territory: a state of drought.

Less than a year after Gov. Jerry Brown **declared an end** to one of the worst droughts in California history, a consortium of nationwide water experts reported Thursday that 44 percent of the state is again experiencing at least moderate drought conditions.

The plight is worst in Southern California, according to the U.S.

Drought Monitor. Los Angeles and San Diego have received less than 2 inches of rain since July, and temperatures along the state's southern coast have soared into the 90s this week.

But the unusual drying is creeping northward. The southern Sierra Nevada is in a "moderate drought," the Drought Monitor reported, and snow levels across the 400-mile range are approaching some of the lowest levels ever recorded this time of year.

At Phillips Station south of Lake Tahoe, where state water officials base their monthly snow surveys, hydrologists on Thursday found just 13 percent of average snowpack. Only twice since record-keeping began in 1946 has there been less snow — in 2014 and 1963.

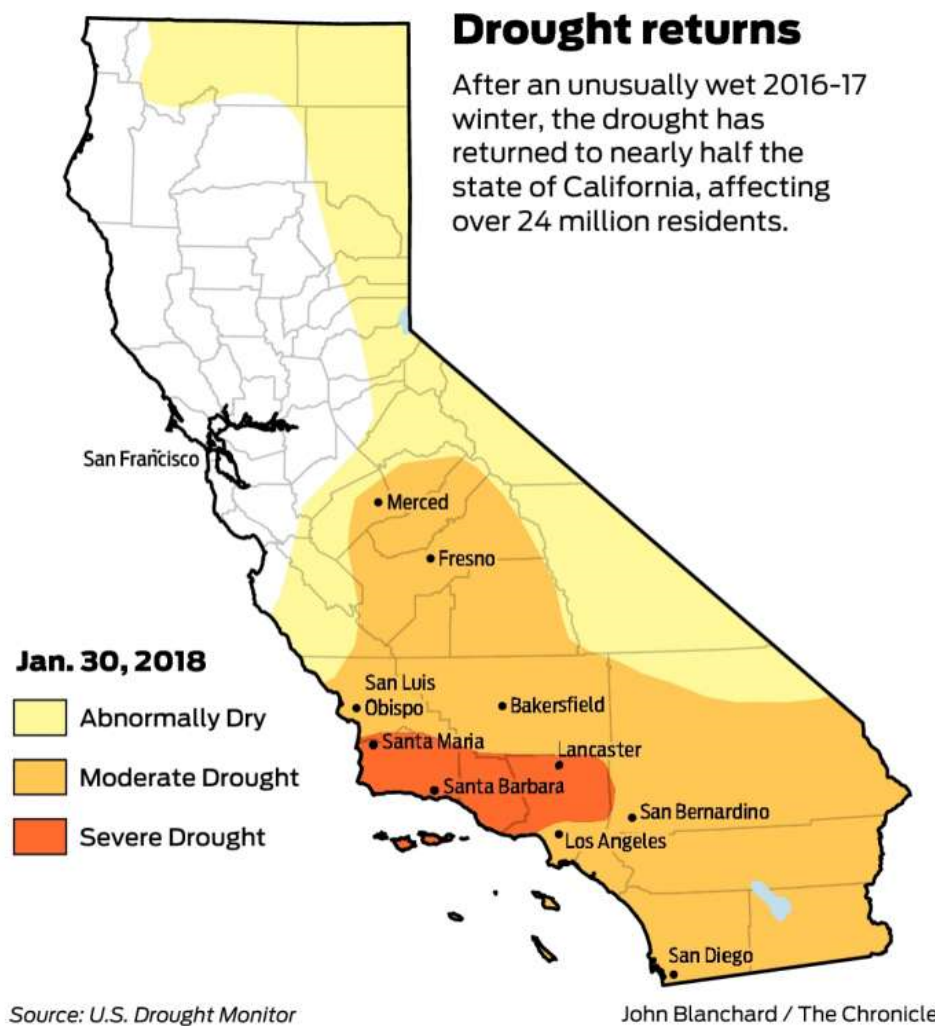
Across the Sierra, the situation wasn't much better. Snowpack measured a meager 27 percent of average for the first of February, according to the California Department of Water Resources.

The snow measurements are closely tracked because the spring and summer melt provides nearly a third of the state's water supply.

“California experiences the most variable weather in the nation,” said Department of Water Resources Director Karla Nemeth. “It’s vital that water conservation efforts remain consistent regardless of the year’s precipitation.”

While state officials are urging water savings the **mandatory regulations** that prompted shorter showers and brown lawns during the five-year drought are still a long way off.

For one, California’s peak rainy season still has another month to go. While forecasts show **little sign of wet weather** through at least mid-February, a handful of late-season storms could quickly improve the water picture.



And California's biggest reservoirs are still flush with the runoff from last year's drought-ending rains. Lake Shasta on Thursday measured 109 percent of what it usually holds this time of year, and New Melones Lake near Sonora was at 139 percent. Even if the winter remains dry, most water agencies have plenty of reserves.

Additionally, the places that store and ship the bulk of California's water supply are in the northern reaches of the state, where drought conditions have yet to take hold. The Sierra is still drought-free from Yosemite National Park north, according to the Drought Monitor.

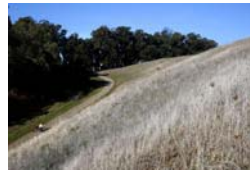
The Drought Monitor, which is a joint effort by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Department of Agriculture and the University of Nebraska, indexes a number of factors for its weekly update, including precipitation, river levels and soil moisture. Last week, 13 percent of California was deemed to be in some stage of drought.

The Bay Area remains neither in a drought nor in the cautionary state of "abnormally dry," the Drought Monitor said.

Still, Felicia Marcus, chair of the State Water Resources Control Board and architect of the drought regulations that were lifted in April, said the situation has begun to warrant concern.

"Every month that it stays dry and every month that we don't get more snowpack makes us more and more worried," she said. "We're all watching the weather reports with more fervor than we watch the sports pages, and this is a halftime score you don't want to have."

CALIFORNIA DROUGHT



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