

Napa prepares for drought or deluge

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California's and Napa County's rainfall moment of truth is nearing.

Some prognosticators think waves of El Nino-fueled storms will make the upcoming rain season a gully-washer. Others fear a fifth consecutive drought year will sear an already parched state.

Napa County is in a bit of a drought twilight zone. Its world-famous vineyards are green, even if some lawns are brown. Its local reservoirs have filled, even though its state water allocations have dwindled.

The period from late October into spring should determine if Napa County tumbles into the extreme drought gripping much of the state or is saved by waves of storms. The answer isn't in the stars, but the clouds.

There is hope - the Climate Prediction Center sees a 95 percent chance for the strong El Nino conditions present in such drenching rainfall years as 1982-83 and 1997-98. Still, not everyone is counting their spilling reservoirs before they fill.

"We're not confident," state Department of Water Resources spokesman Ted Thomas said. "We're just cautiously optimistic."

A state report said notable El Nino weather conditions happened in 1973, 1983 and 1992. For Northern California, this resulted in a near-average rain year in 1973, one of the rainiest years on record in 1983 and below-average rainfall in 1992.

Northern California is an in-between area for El Nino storms, Thomas said.

"It can be either wet or dry," Thomas said. "We're well aware of the possibility that despite a strong El Nino, we could have a fifth year of

drought.”

The Old Farmer’s Almanac has been making weather predictions since 1792, the same year George Washington won a second term as president. It predicts Napa County will have a wet November and December, then sink back into drought.

Napa County Flood Control and Water Conservation District Engineer Phillip Miller has seen forecasts calling for average rainfall through the end of the year, much wetter conditions from January through March and somewhat wetter conditions extending into May.

“But those are only long-term forecasts,” he said. “We’re not all that good at forecasting precipitation in the long run.” Even though local water managers are hoping for El Nino deluges, they have to consider the possibility of continuing drought.

Napa County has escaped the worst of the drought so far. The city of Napa has received a total of 75 s water supplies.

For example, almost 12 inches of rain in December 2014 filled up the city of Napa’s Lake Hennessey reservoir in the hills east of Rutherford and Milliken Reservoir in the hills near Silverado Resort.

“We expect to fill and spill again this year,” city Water General Manager Joy Eldredge said.

Lake Hennessey is by far the bigger of the two local reservoirs, holding 31,000 acre feet, or more than twice as much water as the city would consume in a typical year. As of a week ago, after the long summer draw-down, Hennessey remained at 87 percent of capacity.

Napa also gets water from a sapped State Water Project that originates with a Sierra Nevada snowpack virtually nonexistent last winter. Those brimming local reservoirs kept the worst of the state’s water woes from spilling over to city.

“We’re in better shape than many entities in the state,” Eldredge said.

Still, the city needs to receive at least some state water next year to avoid imposing drought restrictions. Even full local reservoirs cannot meet peak summer demands because of the size of the pipes that move the water.

It’s a matter of water transportation rather than water supplies. Water must flow from both Lake Hennessey and the State Water Project to slake the city’s thirst at certain times.

Eldredge said the city, should it face peak demand problems, might have to do such things as have parts of the city water yards on different days.

Napans may face drought restrictions no matter what the local water situation, should the drought persist. California would likely continue to impose statewide rules. The city is already required by the state to cut water use by 20 percent.

American Canyon faces higher stakes for the upcoming rain season. It depends on largely on the State Water Project and has no local reservoirs.

The State Water Project stores Sierra Nevada snowmelt in Lake Oroville in Butte County. It later releases water to flow down the Feather and Sacramento rivers into the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, from which a portion is piped to Napa County in the North Bay Aqueduct.

But Lake Oroville is only 30 percent full and falling, just above the record low of 24.9 percent set during the 1976-77 drought. The once-mighty lake looks more like a river snaking through a canyon and, in some places, a mere stream.

“If we don’t pick up rain in the coming weeks, we could set a new record-low,” Thomas said.

All of this hits home in American Canyon. The city has responded to the drought so far by cutting water use by 26 percent and stepping up

recycled water use, including using recycled water to flush toilets at a new apartment complex.

Conservation and recycling. “It’s the thing we can control,” Public Works Director Jason Holley said.

He estimated the city will use about 2,900 acre-feet of water this year, compared to about 3,600 acre-feet in 2013. The city will start next year with 1,000 acre-feet of State Water Project water it has yet to use.

“It’s on the books,” Holley said. “It’s in the bank.”

That means American Canyon will have at least some buffer against continued drought.

But Napa County could face deluge instead of drought. A strong El Nino could deliver the kind of pounding storms that in 1997-98 El Nino brought 56 inches of rain to the city of Napa, compared to the average of about 25 inches.

Miller noted that the flood control bypass just opened in downtown Napa. The bypass will take Napa River floodwaters that otherwise could have spilled the river’s banks.

“Downtown Napa is well-protected,” Miller said.

But that doesn’t mean he wants the area to be hit by monster storms.

“We’re hoping for a series of soaking rains that are best to break the drought, not sudden, short periods of intense storms that cause flooding,” Miller said. “We’re ready for that, but it’s not the best way to solve the drought. Soft rains have a chance to settle into the ground.”

Plus, there’s another consideration. The downtown Napa bypass serves as a park with trails when not flooded, which is most of the time.

“Because of all that brand-new landscaping in the bypass, we would prefer not to test it this year and have all our seeds wash away,” Miller

said.

Even a big El Nino rain year might not be a drought-buster, not by itself.

“It’s very unlikely that even a winter with very, very heavy precipitation would completely overcome the conditions that have built up for four consecutive dry years,” said Thomas of the state Department of Water Resources.