

Seventh year of drought looms

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SACRAMENTO (AP) — The threat of a seventh year of drought looms larger with every sunny day in California, where reservoirs hold about half the normal supply of water, state water officials say.

"The state continues to be in a perilous water situation. We're in the seventh year of a potential drought cycle," Resources Agency Secretary Douglas Wheeler said Thursday during a Water Education Foundation meeting.

Rainfall in October was nearly double the average in California, but October is not a month in which officials expect much rain. November is a wetter month normally, but precipitation has averaged only about a third of normal so far, nearly half way through the month.

"There's not very much to be optimistic about" when looking at rainfall figures since Oct. 1, Wheeler said. State officials measure rainfall from October to September each year.

Statewide, rainfall has totaled 51 percent of average since Oct. 1, said Dee Davis, a spokesman for the state drought center.

The National Weather Service long-range forecast calls for wetter than normal weather for northeastern California and drier than average for the rest of the state.

Wheeler said reservoir storage is at or near its lowest level, depending on the measurement, since the 1933-34 drought — the most serious drought of recent decades. Water storage statewide is 57 percent of average, he said.

The 12.1 million acre-feet in storage amounts to less than a third of what California's more than 150 reservoirs can hold, Davis said. An acre-foot supplies a family of four for a year.

"It's certainly the lowest storage in the current cycle of drought," Wheeler said.

Even if normal rainfall returned, California would still have a water shortfall because of increasing demands, said Wheeler. The shortage will increase to as much as 6 million acre-feet annually by the year 2010 unless steps are taken to curtail consumption and increase supplies, he said.

Wheeler said the water management policy announced by Gov. Pete Wilson earlier this year is being implemented on schedule, with interim water quality standards for the

CVP customers' prospects dim

SACRAMENTO (McClatchy) — Central Valley Project customers face dismal prospects for full deliveries in 1993, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation officials said Thursday.

By Feb. 15, the bureau must advise the 264 contractors who draw from its Redding-to-Bakersfield project how much water they can expect in 1993.

But given the state's meager reserves, an endangered fish, a new federal law and possibly tougher Sacramento San Joaquin Delta water quality rules, officials are not hopeful they can lift the cutbacks that have been in place the past two years. The cutbacks in water deliveries range from 25 percent to 75 percent.

"We'll probably have to be conservative going in and then work things out," said Chet Bowling, the CVP's chief of water operations. "The only thing that would make it easier would be a lot of rain and runoff."

A late October storm offered little help, said Bowling.

At Shasta Dam, for example, precipitation for the water year that started Oct. 1 is 209 percent of normal. But runoff — the key to filling reservoirs — is only 83 percent.

What the state needs is a long series of storms, he said. But even steady rain may not be enough to make up for new and looming demands that may lock up more CVP water.

Most obvious of these is the new federal water bill signed Oct. 30 by President Bush.

The bill, among other provisions, sets aside for wildlife 800,000 acre-feet of the roughly 7 million acre-feet of water annually delivered by the project.

Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta expected by the end of the year and creation of a delta oversight board pending.

Much of the state's water supply flows through the delta on its way south from the Sierra Nevada. Management of the flow determines how far inland saltwater intrudes into the delta from the San Francisco Bay.