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The drought declaration drags on

By Michael Raffety | Editor | April 16, 2009 15:01

While several directors of the El Dorado Irrigation District were making side bets on when Sly Park would spill, the board stuck by its drought declaration it had made last month.

April 15 Jenkinson Lake at Sly Park was at 96 percent of capacity.

Besides good rain runoff in March and some more in April to Jenkinson Lake, its fullness is a result of diverting additional water into the lake through the Hazel Creek Tunnel. That water came as a result of draining Caples Lake last fall while it was being repaired. Of the approximately 20,000 acre-feet of water drained from Caples, 3,550 was diverted into Sly Park. A lesser amount - about 1,150 acre-feet - from the district's other high mountain reservoirs was diverted into Sly Park.

EID snow surveys show the snowpack for Caples Lake to be at 91 percent of average as of April 6 and Silver Lake at 88 percent.

The pressure for conservation is a result of cutbacks by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the governor's Feb. 20 declaration of a drought. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation controls Folsom Lake, among other reservoirs in the Central Valley Project, and coordinates with the State Water Project.

Folsom, too, is in good shape, filling to 79 percent of its capacity by midnight Tuesday and inflows coming at 4,100 cubic feet per second and releases at 3,200 cfs. The April 1 state snow survey showed the snowpack for the American River watershed to be 81 percent of average. The current stats point to a full Folsom Lake after the snow melts.

Nevertheless, the governor's declaration has requested a 20 percent reduction by urban water users. Even though EID's customer base isn't "urban," the USBR will cut EID's water deliveries from Folsom Lake, which serves the heavily populated El Dorado Hills.

The district is allotted 7,550 acre-feet of Central Valley Project water out of Folsom Lake, but last year received 4,123. Though that is 45 percent less than the full allocation, it is 25 percent less than the district's "historical use." The bureau defines "historical use," according to EID Communication Director Deanne Kloepfer, as " 'normal' use averaged over three years."

If the bureau cuts back 45 percent on its historical use allotment to EID as announced March 20, the 4,123 acre-feet will shrink to 2,875 acre-feet, according to Dave Witter, EID director of natural resources. The next allocation announcement is due April 20 and it is expected that the allocation cutback will be reduced to 35 percent.

The district also sends 4,560 acre-feet downstream to Folsom that is collected by Weber Dam and several historical water ditches. The actual amount verified by a gauge is 3,000 acre-feet. These are all water rights that predate the 1914 establishment of the what is now called the State Water Resources Control Board. Pre-1914 rights cannot be regulated by the state. And the USBR cannot

charge the district habitat restoration fees on pre-1914 water, but it does charge a lesser fee for the district to take its own water out of Folsom Lake.

The reason the district only uses 4,123 acre-feet of CVP water from Folsom is because it first uses its own pre-1914 water. As a consequence of using less CVP water its average use is less and it is cut back even further in a low water year.

An acre-foot is equal to an acre covered with water 1 foot deep. It equals 325,851 gallons.

EID has declared a Stage 1 Drought Alert, which calls for voluntary cutbacks of 15 percent. It also includes a drought surcharge on water rates: 15.5 percent higher on Tier 1 and on Tier 2 single-family rates, 27 percent more on Tier 3 single-family rates.

Despite the likelihood of Sly Park Dam spilling and Folsom Lake filling EID's Folsom allotment is at the mercy of lakes far beyond its borders. San Luis Rey Reservoir in Merced County near Monterey County was at 48 percent of its capacity April 7. Shasta was at 66 percent April 14. Other major CVP dams were in the lower 60s.

EID plans to ask for consideration from bureau's "shortage policy," get credit for its already "extraordinary conservation measures" such as the recycled water used for landscaped watering in El Dorado Hills and the Irrigation Management System agricultural water conservation plan. It also wants to get additional water allotted to provide for population increase in El Dorado Hills.

Last year in addition to the 3,000 acre-feet of gauged ditch water and 4,123 acre-feet of CVP water, both taken at Folsom Lake, the district shipped 3,900 acre-feet to El Dorado Hills through the Gold Hill Intertie and provided 3,600 acre-feet of recycled water for landscape irrigation, according to Witter.

"We need to get some credit for over-reducing ... We've already done it," said Director George Osborne at the April 13 meeting.

"If we save 15 percent (voluntary cutbacks) will we have enough out of Folsom Can we get enough through the Gold Hill Intertie (to El Dorado Hills)" asked Director Harry Norris.

"Last year we maximized water through the system and we got cut back 25 percent," said Dave Witter.

"This year Sly Park is sitting at 95 percent. We're holding 15,080 acre-feet up on the hill just in case," Witter said.

The 15,080 acre-feet is the domestic water supply from EID's hydroelectric system known by its designation by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission as Project 184. Project 184 is four manmade alpine lakes, a diversion dam, 22.5 miles of flumes, canals, and tunnels, Forebay Reservoir and the 21 megawatt Akin Powerhouse 1,900 feet below Forebay.

Additionally EID has rights to 17,000 more acre-feet of water from Project 184, but the bureau is delaying allowing EID to take its water out of Folsom Lake. The district also has 15,000 acre-feet granted by an act of Congress named after former Congressman Vic Fazio. This Fazio water also is being held up by the bureau.

"Isn't it ironic to have 17,000 acre-feet sitting in Folsom and we have to buy (CVP) water" Norris

said.

Total demand in El Dorado Hills exclusive of recycled water is at least 12,000 acre-feet, Witter told the Mountain Democrat.

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