



San jos 233 climate change

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In Santa Clara County, lawns are dry, a reservoir is nearly empty, and water restrictions are mandated. After two winters with very little rain — and San Jose’s driest year in 128 years of record keeping — the county is marked by one of the worst droughts in modern history.

Santa Clara County’s experience of drought is set apart from the rest of the state by a myriad of issues — less water from the Sierra Nevada, the effect of human-caused climate change on water supplies, and a case of incredibly bad luck.

“This is a dire emergency caused by the confluence of several horrible things happening all at the same time,” said Gary Kremen, director of Santa Clara Valley Water. “This isn’t like someone crying wolf.”

Valley Water relies heavily on water from the Sierra Nevada snowpack more than 100 miles away. But the agency only received 5% of the water it contracts from the state this year, a quarter of what it sources from the feds, and very little local rainfall.

“We have 2 million people in the county, compared to San Francisco’s 800,000 or Oakland’s 500,000,” he noted. “This is where the people live. We use a lot of water.”

Kremen likens the drought situation in his water district to someone losing their job without savings to fall back on and no outside help to get them through.

“You got no money coming in and none of your relatives want to send you any money because they have their own difficulties,” he said.

Santa Clara County is so dry and the water levels so low, that Kremen’s agency now requires a 15% reduction in water use from all people and businesses. That amount may not sound like a lot, but if it doesn’t rain this winter, places like San Jose could be in deep trouble next spring or summer.

“I do not believe there’s enough water for a third year [of drought],” Kremen said. “It’s gotten horrible very quick.”

The kicker on top of two very dry years in a row? The largest reservoir in Valley Water’s system is virtually empty at 3% full, after it was emptied so that the Anderson Dam near Morgan Hill could undergo seismic retrofitting.



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“When it’s full this is our primary water supply in addition to our aquifer,” said John Varela, a director on the Santa Clara Valley Water District Board of Directors. “But it’s empty, and we’re in a drought, so it’s not a good time.”

The agency drained the reservoir because the dam is vulnerable to shaking from a severe earthquake. The state wanted to make sure it could withstand at least a magnitude 7.0 quake, and the federal government mandated the retrofit. The work won’t be finished for about a decade.

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