

# WRID sets storage water allocations at 3, 4 percent

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Water supply forecasters are comparing the winter of 2014-15 to 1991, which was known for its "miracle March," but one-third of the way through March already, it doesn't appear there is going to be a repeat of that month.

With this year seeing a fourth straight year of drought (the late 1980s-early 1990s drought stretched to 1992 for a sixth consecutive year of drought), the Walker River Irrigation District Board approved storage water allocations of 3 percent for the East Walker River and 4 percent for the West Walker.

However, WRID board member David Little, remembering a lawsuit in the 1990s after the district drained Bridgeport reservoir in 1988, killing many trout and damaging the East Walker fish habitat just below the reservoir.

He said if it was just 3 percent, and hearing WRID general manager Robert Bryan say the California Fish and Game had requested the allocation be zero percent for water users whose water rights were connected to the East Walker.

Board chairman Jim Snyder expressed support for that idea, and the eventual vote to approve the 3 percent/4 percent allocations, passed 3-2 with Little and Snyder opposed.

Bryan and watermaster Jim Shaw, though, said they felt comfortable about those figures. Bryan said he came up with the allocation figures "after a long, long week of looking" at and "crunching numbers" in an effort to determine the best numbers for those determinations.

Bryan, though, similar to last year, suggested water users take their allocation early so that it could be used, as if they waited, the water might not still be available, after losses from evaporation.

Last year's allocations were 1.33 percent for the west (Topaz) and 9.5 percent on the east (Bridgeport).

These figures only deal with storage water rights, while surface water rights are covered under the C-125 federal court decree and they are based on the priority (year) of the water rights.

Little stressed he thought it was pertinent the district make peace with the California agency and set the allocation at 0 percent, as a way to avoid any lawsuits.

Smith Valley rancher Pete Fenili, who was on the WRID board back when that lawsuit was filed, said it cost the district \$3 million as a result of the lawsuit filed against the district.

Bryan had noted the 3 percent allocation for Bridgeport would represent 1,000 acre-feet of water and Little said he didn't think it was worth it to risk any lawsuit. Bryan said if it appeared they were getting too close they would cut off the water availability.

Legal counsel Dale Ferguson said the 3 percent was still figured to maintain the minimum pool in the Bridgeport lake and minimum flows below the dam. But he and Bryan said there was no guarantee they would get the water.

Little said he was just trying to look out for the best interests of the district.

According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service March Water Outlook Report, 2015 is vying with 1991 to be the lowest snowfall impact from the 24 SNOTEL precipitation/snow measuring devices, meaning this winter will be either the lowest or second lowest for snowpack. It shows 32 of the SNOTEL sites showed snowpack levels of lowest or second lowest for March 1.

Watermaster Shaw earlier in the meeting said the SNOTEL showed a 38 percent snow-water equivalent and 50 percent precipitation for the sites that feed the Walker River, but he thought the precipitation figure might be high. March began with the Walker River SNOTEL sites showing the snowpack at 39 percent (45 percent at the same time last year, with the east at 32 percent and west at 40 percent).

Shaw relayed that the lower SNOTEL sites have no snow at this time. He also cited the recent warm weather, with average daily temperatures of more than 40 degrees.

To start the month, the Bridgeport and Topaz reservoirs were at 15 percent of combined storage capacity, compared to 18 percent last year (the average is 53 percent of capacity). Streamflow forecasts range from 30 to 38 percent of average.

The Carson River Basin SNOTEL sites showed snowpack of 36 percent of normal to start this month, compared to 55 percent last year. The October to February precipitation was at 53 percent of average, after February's precipitation was at 92 percent of normal.

Lahontan reservoir storage was at 14 percent of capacity, compared to 25 percent last year, and streamflow forecast volumes ranged from 12 to 33 percent of average.

With a storm headed this way later this week, there is some hope. The March 1 water outlook report said of the comparisons to 1991, "From here on out, if 2015 continues to mimic 1991, we'll all be delighted by April 1 considering where we stand now. That is because in addition to a dire March 1 snowpack, 1991 is more remembered for its 'Miracle March.' The snowpack in the Sierra went from 15-20% of normal on March 1 to 60-80% of normal by April 1.

"The second half of March may be our last chance for drought relief this year as later months are historically not known for significant recovery," it said.

Conversation at the meeting also ranged to wells and if the rights from the district's wells could be temporarily transferred to someone's private well to pump it there instead but the answer would need to come from the state engineer.

Board members said it was something they were considering.

## **WRID ELECTION**

The deadline for WRID board nominations is March 18.