

SIERRA SNOWPACK

Water is abundant, so drought is over

Governor officially ends emergency after snow survey

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After a wet winter accentuated by last week's storm, it's finally official: California's drought is over.

Following Wednesday's Sierra snow survey, Gov. Jerry Brown announced the end of California's "drought emergency."

Then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed an executive order in June 2008 proclaiming a statewide drought.

The winter's fourth survey revealed 165 percent as much water in the snowpack as the April 1 average. This survey is thought to measure the season's peak snow accumulation.

The Sierra snows are a crucial source of water for California. Officials use the snowpack survey to forecast the state's water supply for the rest of the year, and it's looking good so far.

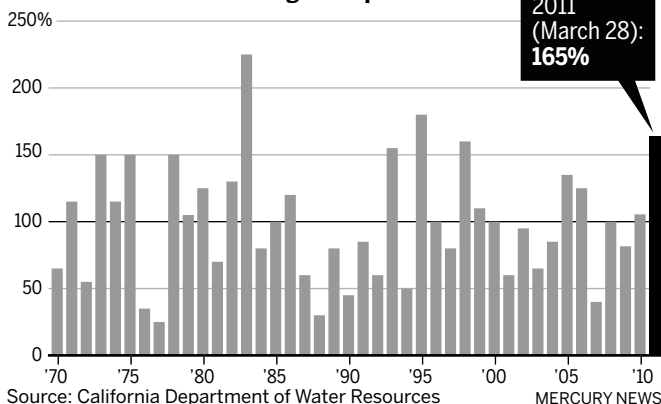
"We have to go back 16 years to find as much snow on April 1," said Frank Gehrke, chief of the California Cooperative Snow Surveys Program. "It's well above average, and it clearly bodes well."

This was a weak La Niña year, which generally indicates a relatively warm, dry winter, Gehrke said. A dry January and half of February meant officials weren't sure the state would get enough water, despite December's

Healthy snowpack

The water content of the Sierra Nevada snowpack is at 165 percent of normal for April 1, when the rainy season ends. Snowpack levels haven't been this healthy since 1995.

Percent of historical average on April 1



above-average snowpack.

"It was a good pack, but it still wouldn't be nearly adequate," said Gehrke.

After mid-February "the rest was pretty wet and cold," he said.

The storms in March ensured that the state's major reservoirs had more water than normal. And several of the Santa Clara Valley Water District's reservoirs were filled to the brim. Officials drained water from some reservoirs before water levels became high enough to make the reservoirs unsafe in the event of an earthquake.

The abundance of snowpack water means the state estimates that it will be able to supply two-thirds of the water requested, compared with half last year and less in 2009 and 2008. It retains some water to protect threat-

ened and endangered fish.

And with all the snow, it's a great time to go skiing.

"We've had incredible March snows, and the spring skiing is phenomenal," said Michael Dalzell of Kirkwood Mountain Resort near South Lake Tahoe. The resort needs 50 more inches to break a 19-year snowfall record.

Like many other Tahoe resorts, Kirkwood will stay open an extra week, until May 1.

With more snow expected, Tahoe skiing may be extended even further, with another resort, Alpine Meadows, already planning to operate some lifts into mid-May.

"With an abundance of snow, it's certainly a different kind of spring skiing than Californians are used to," Dalzell said. "If you haven't been skiing yet, April's the month."