

Fresno started its rainy season ‘significantly below’ normal. How will 2018 look?

By Ashleigh Panoos

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The central San Joaquin Valley could see a trace amount of rain after the new year, but nothing that will improve air quality or the “significantly below” normal rain totals for this year, according to Meteorologist Jeff Barlow with the National Weather Service in Hanford.

The west side of the valley is expected to bear the brunt of the storm on Tuesday night and Wednesday, bringing with it only several hundredths of an inch.

The Sierra may also see some snow above 8,000 feet.

Even if rain does fall, Barlow said, it won't help the air quality, which is the main concern of the weather service and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

“We've had a stagnant air mass over us for a few days. Rain would help out, but not the trace amounts that are forecast,” Barlow said. In order to affect air quality, “we would need a really strong cold front to push through, bringing soaking rain.”

Since the new season began Oct. 1, Fresno's rain total is .41 inches. Compared to last year at the same time, Fresno had accumulated 4.47 inches of rain. Normal is 3.26 inches.

Barlow said there is a reason the West Coast is so dry. Freezing temperatures in the eastern U.S. have kept the western part of the country dry and warm. A blocking ridge of high pressure has been keeping storms out of the state.

“It blocks the storms from the Pacific Ocean and they head north into Alaska,” he said. “We're hoping it's going to break down and we'll see some storm systems coming into California.”

The miniscule amount of rain is also causing concern in the ag industry.

“Last year was a bonanza year,” said Fresno County Farm Bureau CEO Ryan Jacobsen. Now, “the lack of snow pack is extremely worrisome for the upcoming water season,” he said.

Despite all the water that came down last year, Jacobsen said local reservoirs were not able to capture it all, and farmers will rely on snow pack to carry them through the summer months.

Jacobsen said although the first half of the season has been dry, farmers are still holding out hope for the second half.

The high December temperatures are also not good for tree and vine fruits like peaches, plums, nectarines, cherries and grapes, Jacobsen said. Trees and vines require a certain amount of hours in the cold to chill, and December hasn't provided that.

Gov. Jerry Brown declared an end to the five-year drought in April, but every major city in California has had less-than-normal rainfall this year. Fresno is at just 12 percent of normal, and Sacramento is at 40 percent. Los Angeles is at three percent.

Even if the winter remains mostly dry, California does have some cushion. Last year's record precipitation left most of the state's major reservoirs in good shape. Shasta Lake, the state's largest reservoir, is at 114 percent of normal for this time of year. Folsom Lake is at 117 percent. Only Lake Oroville is well below normal, a deliberate response to last February's emergency that forced the evacuation of 188,000 residents.