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Dry Conditions Pose Risks Beyond Water Restrictions

By Cathy Dausman



Photos Andy Scheck

materials" away from their homes and properties, she said, and encouraged homeowners to request a free wildfire risk assessment.

Wildlife, too, goes in search of water. If animals can't find adequate drinking water in their normal habitat, they may venture closer to civilization. It's hard to tell if that was the reason one Orinda resident recently spied a bobcat just outside the backyard window.

"This is the driest season on record," said East Bay Municipal Utility District spokesperson Andrea Pook. "The Mokelumne River watershed is at only at 24 percent of its normal capacity, and every couple days without precipitation the level drops again."

Even when it does rain, those storms have sometimes missed the watersheds, she said. Still, Pook said the overall picture "isn't that frightening" because "there is half a winter ahead of us." When water forecasting is done in April, if the storage levels are still low EBMUD board of directors would then request water rationing, Pook said.

Many longtime Lamorinda residents recall the water crisis of the mid 1970s. Jim Russell of Moraga watched his all-grass front yard die out back then. "We lost a lot of stuff" complying with rationing, he said. His family removed their front lawn during the drought and replaced it with shore juniper, and later bamboo and river rock hardscape. Most people really got on the recycling bandwagon, Russell said. He remembers collecting shower water in containers and recycling it onto outdoor plants.

"Even today I can't stand to hear water running," he said.

When it comes to drinking water, East Bay residents may be lucky: 90 percent of their supply comes from the Sierra Mountains, and those reservoirs are 65 percent full (the San Pablo Dam and Lafayette Reservoir water would be used only in emergencies).

Pook thinks there is more water recycling and conservation today than there was during the 1970s-era drought, but her company is being proactive: "We're not just praying and hoping" for water relief, Pook said, "we're planning."

Drought Mitigation in Lamorinda

Average annual rainfall in San Francisco is 20.78 inches, yet in 2013 that amount fell to 3.38 inches. The 2013 rainfall amount was less than half the previous record low of 8.79 inches, set in 1946. Because of this, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District reminds all homeowners to maintaining clearance around housing structures, keeping clear debris on roofs, in gutters, under and on decks and by mowing, disking or trimming grasses or brush to a 3 inch maximum height. Supervise any open flames, including barbecues and fire pits. Keep a hose or water bucket handy. Watch for sparks, use a spark arrestor, metal screen or cover. MOFD offers a free wildfire risk assessment to its home and property owners. The assessment takes about 45 minutes and helps homeowners identify ways to make their property safe against wildfires. For more information, contact Fire Prevention at (925) 258-4525, ext. 533.

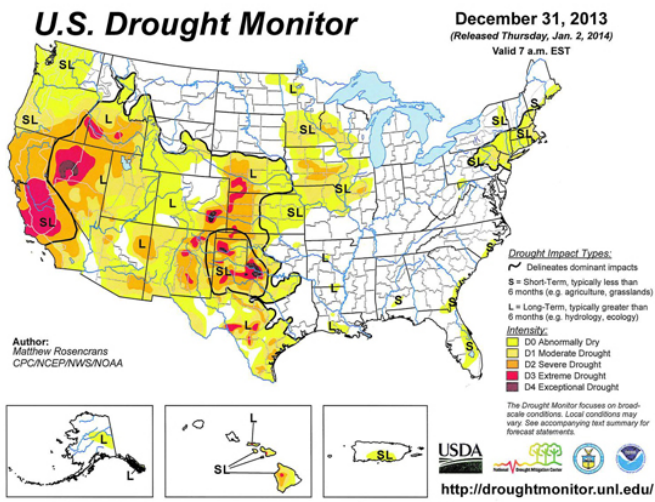
Source: MOFD Fire Marshal Kathy Leonard

While the threat of water restrictions are top of mind for many local residents, other dangers loom in these dry conditions, including the threat of wildfire, said Moraga-Orinda Fire District fire marshal Kathy Leonard. "Ninety-eight percent of California is now in drought," she wrote in an email. "According to the National Climatic Data Center, California is facing the driest year since accurate records began in 1895. CalFire reported more than 4,700 separate fires for 2013, 1,300 more than the annual average."

And wildfire conditions will likely continue into the winter. "Without rain, the vegetation is still very dry and could ignite under the right conditions," Leonard said. "Recent fires in Big Sur, Napa and Humboldt County are proof that cold temperatures have no effect on reducing the incidence of wildfires."

MOFD fire engines are still carrying "the full complement" of wild land firefighting equipment. In a winter with normal rainfall, this equipment would have already been removed from the trucks, Leonard said.

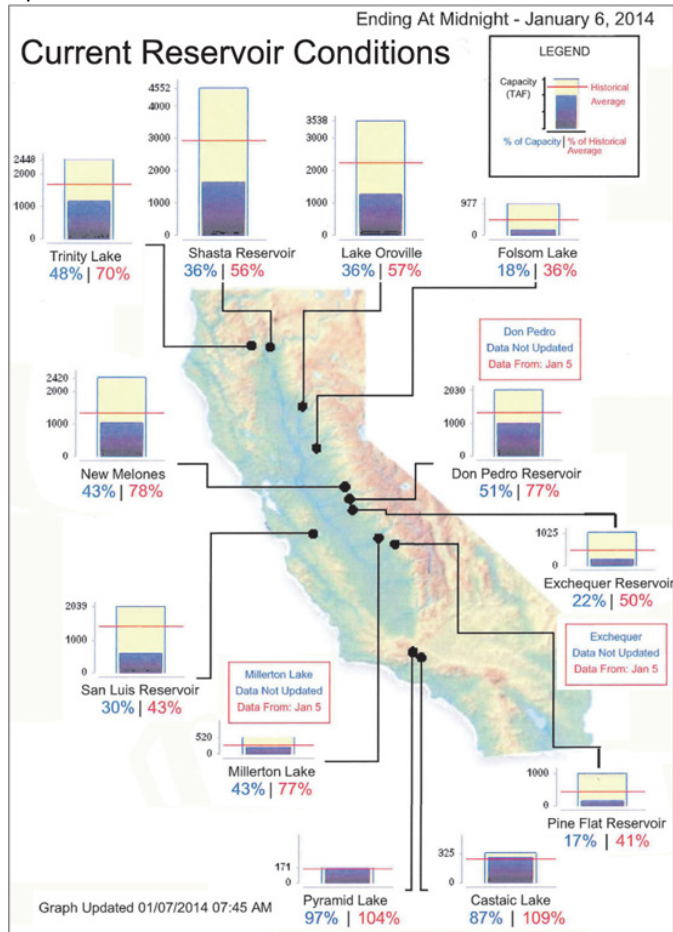
"MOFD reminds all homeowners to remain vigilant about keeping dry vegetation and other combustible



Maps provided



Spotted Bobcat outside a window in Orinda. Photo Dale Newhouse



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