



Written by [James Murphy](#) on May 5, 2019

2019 Calif. Snowpack in Terrific Shape No Thanks to Climate Change

The State of California — so freshwater challenged for so long — can breathe a little bit easier this year as the last snow survey of the season shows the all-important snowpack in the Sierra-Nevada Mountains is well above average. The survey, done by the state's [Department of Water Resources \(DWR\)](#), shows official measurements taken at Phillips Station on May 2 are a full 88 percent above average.



According to the DWR, melting snow supplies approximately one-third of all water used in the state. Snowpack is measured at least five times per season, with the April measurement being the most important, since the snowpack is at its peak, with melting and run-off typically occurring after then.

A manual survey at the station, which is near the Nevada border, recorded a snow depth of 47 inches and a snow water equivalent (SWE) of 27.5 inches. Statewide, California's snowpack is estimated to have an SWE of 31 inches, which is 44 percent above average. SWE is the theoretical amount of water that would result if the snow were to melt instantaneously.

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“California's cities and farms can expect ample water supplies this summer,” said DWR Director Karla Nemeth. “But it's critical that it's put to use replenishing groundwater basins and storage reservoirs for the next inevitable drought. Every resident and business can also help California by using water as efficiently as possible.”

The water content in the snowpack gives state hydrologists a good measure of what California can expect for a water supply for the coming dry season. April 1 is the typical high point for the snowpack in a season although melting snow and the resulting run-off will continue until the summer.

“2019 has been an extremely good year in terms of snowpack,” said Jon Ericson, Chief of Flood Division Management for the DWR. “Based on our surveys, we are seeing a very dense, cold snowpack that will continue to produce run-off into the late summer.”

Currently, California's six largest reservoirs are between 96-128 percent of average for this time of the year. The state's largest reservoir, Lake Shasta, currently has 8 percent more water than average.

In March of this year, the National Drought Mitigation Center in Nebraska officially declared California [drought-free](#) for the first time since 2011. That might seem like terrific news until you realize that California is a drought-prone region. Low precipitation in the state [seems to be cyclical](#) with severe drought being recorded in 1929-1934, 1976-1977, 1987-1992 and 2012-2016. So, Karla Nemeth is correct when she calls the next drought “inevitable.”

Does this increase in available water bode well for California's upcoming fire season, which has been so devastating in the past few years?



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Unfortunately, probably not. While more available water for fighting fires is definitely a good thing, the increase in water also means that more vegetation — grass, weeds, saplings — will grow in the wild, creating more fuel for fires. With much of the state in a Mediterranean Climate — warm, dry summers and mild, wet winters — a dry season in the summer and autumn is coming, which will dry out much of the new growth. So, the increase in water has the potential to make fires worse.

Politicians in California like to blame the dry California weather and the resulting fires on so-called anthropogenic climate change. It's simply not true. Consider, for instance, that at the end of the last glacial maximum, [several large lakes](#) — comparable to the Great Lakes — existed in California and Nevada. Where, pray tell, are those lakes today? The Great Lakes still exist after all — why don't the large lakes of the American West?

Because sunny California is just naturally a drier place. Those large lakes, which were likely left by melting glaciers, simply evaporated — leaving only their remnants behind.

One of the great things about California is that it's usually sunny. You can make outdoor plans far in advance and not have to worry about the weather too much. One of the bad things about California is that it's usually sunny. Without rain, an area can become very dry. And that's natural — not man-made.

Photo of Sierra Nevada Mountains: California Department of Water Resources



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