

# Our view: Reservoirs full, but keep conserving water

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A couple crosses Second Street in downtown Reno during a rainy day last month. All of the precipitation doesn't mean we can stop using water responsibly. (Photo: Andy Barron/RGJ) Buy Photo

Conflicting messages about Reno's drought situation abound.

They should not become an excuse to slide back to bad water conservation habits. The need to continue to use water responsibly can easily get lost in the back and forth of recent news reports.

The U.S. drought monitor currently rates Reno as living under D3 drought intensity. This means the drought here is "extreme."

That is only one stage better than D4 "exceptional" drought intensity, which we faced last year.

Yet it was announced that residents no longer need to cut usage by 10 percent. This is what the Truckee Meadows Water Authority had requested the past two years — and Reno-Sparks responded by cutting water use 20 percent in 2015.

TMWA says extra conservation measures are not needed because it is already storing all of the water it legally can in its drought reserves, and that it does not expect to tap into those reserves this year. Neither will the water utility implement increased educational conservation efforts again this year nor will it have higher levels of enforcement for water wasters, as had been the case.

Winter precipitation reports were the source of some less than inspiring news. It may have seemed like a lot of snow fell this winter, but Truckee River Basin statistics by the National Resources Conservation Service show snowpack levels for 2016 fell basically at the median. The relatively wet winter was not enough to cancel out meager snowpacks in previous years.

Meanwhile, good news comes from TMWA's recently unveiled online "tracker." It shows how much water is being held in upstream drought reserves. The amount is about double what it was 20 years ago.

This change stems largely from the complex Truckee River Operating Agreement. Finalized in December, the pact allows TMWA to store more water, alters when water must be released into the river, and inspired full acquisition of Donner Lake to use for Reno-Sparks drought emergencies.

Obtaining both halves of Donner Lake revealed another twist. Because of that acquisition, if the region has another drought year like 2015 (the worst on record) but it lasts for two decades, TMWA projects it would nonetheless have twice as much water stored in drought reserves in 2035 than it did last year.

Growth does not seem to be a concern either, at least not water-wise. Agricultural water rights still exist in the region that can be converted to less thirsty residential and business water rights. For this and other reasons, TMWA says it can easily accommodate the population boom.

And yet we live in the high desert. Water is more precious here than in most of the country.

Good planning and good policies have Reno-Sparks sitting well for water resources, unlike many places in the West.

Still, it remains important to water responsibly. A good rule of thumb to live by, regardless of drought status: Don't use more water than you need.

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