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California

Warm December storms of little help to snowpack

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — The big storms that hit California in December brought more mountain snow than at this point last year, but not enough water content to achieve normal levels, the season's first manual snow survey has confirmed.

At a plot along Highway 50 near Echo Summit, about 90 miles east of here, state Department of Water Resources officials on Dec. 30 found a snow water equivalent of 4 inches, or 33 percent of average, reported Frank Gehrke, chief of the agency's snow surveys program.

The statewide electronic readings for that day were more encouraging, as 105 sensors in the Sierra Nevada detected a snow water equivalent of 4.8 inches, or half the multi-year average. That's better than the 20 percent of normal water content in the mountains at the time of last winter's first survey.

Elizabeth Scott, a DWR spokeswoman, was encouraged



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

The Trinity Alps west of Redding, Calif., are normally covered with snow this time of year, but they showed only a dusting as of Dec. 30. A statewide snow survey that day found only about half the normal snow water content for the date.

to see snow falling as she was putting chains on her car to proceed to the survey site.

"We need a lot more," she said. "This needs to continue and be consistent so we can get up above normal this year."

Unfortunately for growers,

chances look slim that the snowpack will reach average levels by April 1, when it is considered to be at its peak. The federal Climate Prediction Center still envisions a wetter-than-normal winter throughout the state but with higher temperatures, which

could lock snow levels in the high country.

"The high-elevation stuff is great, but we really want to see that mid-level snow packing in as well," said Michelle Mead, a National Weather Service warning coordinator here. "The current forecasts reduce the likelihood of that happening."

Water officials and National Weather Service forecasters have said California needs at least 150 percent of normal precipitation — including 150 percent of normal snowpack — to avoid a fourth straight year of drought in 2015. The snowpack is important because it provides spring and summer runoff for reservoirs after the rains have stopped.

As a series of storms brought near-record rainfall to many areas of California in December, snow levels mostly stayed at 5,000 feet or higher. Temperatures dropped considerably Dec. 30 when a cold front swooped down from the Gulf of Alaska, bringing strong, damaging winds to northern areas that

downed trees and power lines and caused power outages and two fatalities, the National Weather Service reported.

In anticipation of several nights of below-freezing temperatures, citrus growers were preparing to use irrigation pumps and wind machines, said Bob Blakely, vice president of the Exeter-based California Citrus Mutual.

"I think we're taking it pretty seriously," Blakely said of the cold. "Growers are out making their preparations — making sure the pumps are all working so they'll be able to run water, making sure their fuel tanks are ready to go."

Temperatures were expected to warm up again on the weekend after New Year's. The Sacramento area's next shot at rain was expected around Jan. 7, ushering in a series of light, periodic storms through January, according to AccuWeather's long-range forecast.

California would have lots of work to do to achieve an average snowpack on April 1,

considered the season's benchmark. Even the northern Sierras, which have the most snow at 57 percent of average water content for the date, is at just 20 percent of its average for April 1, the DWR reports.

The department and cooperating agencies conduct manual snow surveys around the first of the month from January to May, providing a basis for determining allocation levels for state and federal water contractors.

The meager snowpack and its implications for water storage were a key reason the DWR initially estimated several weeks ago that it will deliver just 10 percent of requested allocations to State Water Project contractors. The 29 public agencies with state water contracts serve more than 25 million Californians and nearly 1 million acres of irrigated farmland, according to DWR. A 10 percent allocation would be twice the percentage finally delivered to State Water Project contractors in 2014. The last 100-percent allocation was in 2006.

California citrus growers avert frost damage

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

Citrus growers in California's San Joaquin Valley appear to have averted frost damage as they've harvested about a quarter of their crop of navel oranges.

Nighttime lows during the week of New Year's didn't get as cold as anticipated and growers were well prepared in deploying irrigation and wind machines as early as 10 p.m., the Exeter-based California Citrus Mutual reported.

Their early start helped keep orchard temperatures higher as temperatures in most areas never got as low as the 26 degrees that was forecast, CCM president Joel Nelsen said. Nonetheless, growers spent about \$5 million in fuel to run the machines and water pumps.

With weekend temperatures expected to be higher, the industry's attention was turning to getting more of the estimated 81 million carton navel crop off the trees.

"We're approaching the 25 percent mark on the navel harvest," CCM vice president Bob Blakely said, adding that yields have been "running about on estimate."

Growers have been picking smaller fruit than normal because of drought stress on trees throughout the prime citrus region of Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties, which received no irrigation water from the federal Central Valley Project this year.

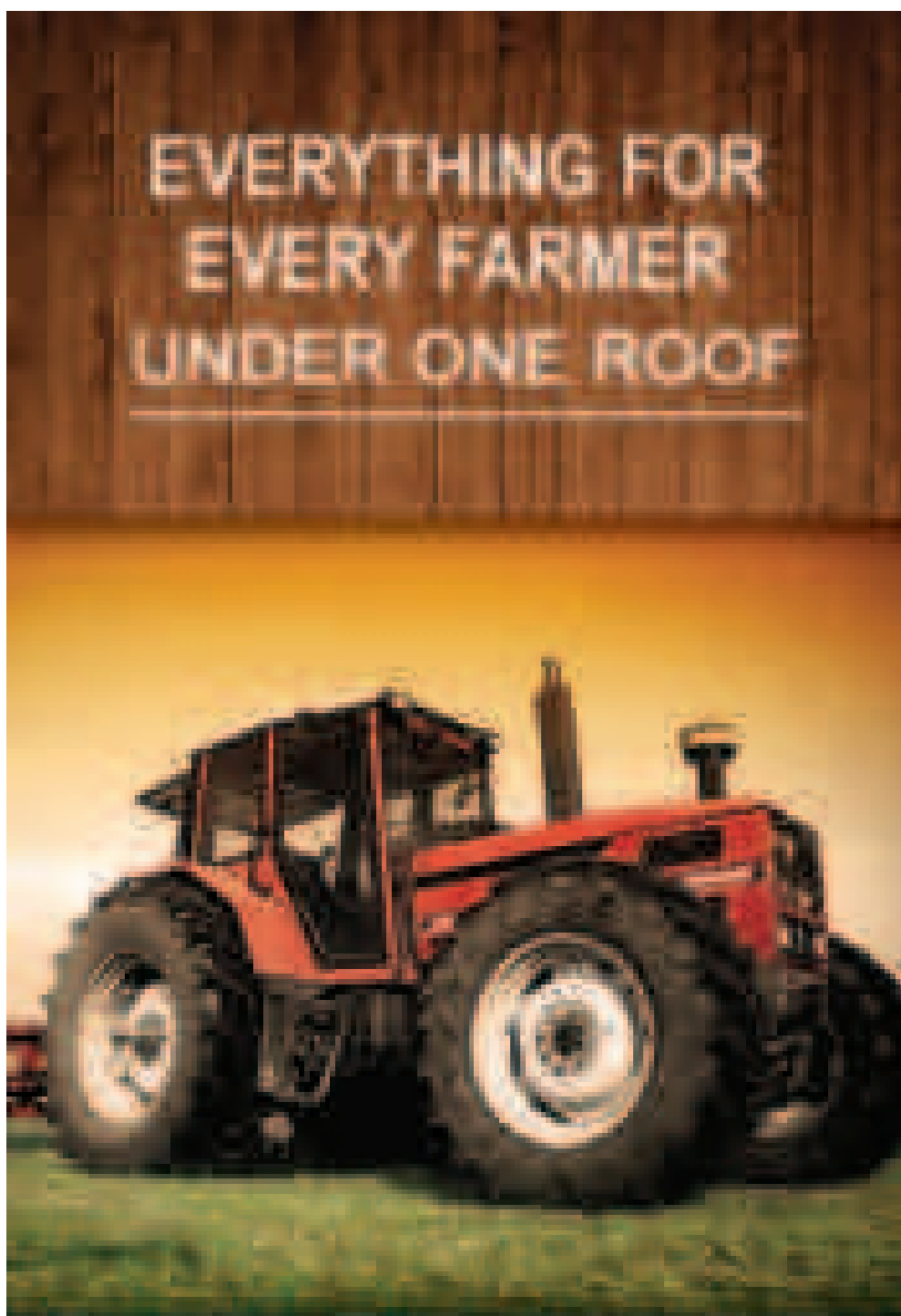
However, navels have sweetened nicely, and utilization rates — the fruit that's packed as fresh and not diverted to juice — have remained above 80 per-

cent, Blakely said.

"Some of the blocks have come in lighter than what was estimated, but with all these rains we've started to see some improvement in size," he said. "The quality has been good, and the fruit's a little bit father advanced than it usually is at this time of year."

The New Year's cold snap was the season's first after freezes during the 2013-2014 harvest cost the citrus industry about \$441 million in revenue, including \$260 million lost to navel orange producers and processors, according to Citrus Mutual.

Adding to growers' woes has been the drought, which prompted drastic water curtailments that caused some producers to take out less viable orchards and fallow ground until it can be redeveloped.



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