

Headline: Vintners feel drought's pinch
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One look at the reservoirs -- via online data or in person -- tells the grim story.

At the San Luis Reservoir, the water level is down from 968,000 acre feet in March 2006 to 402,000 acre feet in September 2006 and to 82,000 acre feet this July.

At the reservoirs that help feed the Salinas Valley's expansive underground aquifer, Lake San Antonio is at 74 percent of capacity and Lake Nacimiento at 31 percent of capacity. Total rainfall to date in Monterey County hasn't surpassed six inches.

And the drought may be about to get worse for many cities through out the Bay Area and Silicon Valley. A federal court ruling last week that seeks to protect the delta smelt -- a rare fish found only in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta -- could reduce the amount of water drawn from the delta by one-third and bring water rationing by next summer.

Further south, in Monterey County, the rolling pasturelands are dead and brown, grapevines have salt rings encircling their bases and the Monterey Peninsula is in its eighth year of a Stage 1 water shortage, meaning non-essential use of water is discouraged.

As agriculture consultant and former University of California researcher Evan Oakes put it, "in Monterey County, we have a long history of drought and this is really nothing new. We are in a perpetual state of drought and the growers are pretty much used to it. The vegetable crops are getting well water and this type of drought really doesn't affect them because we have such a huge aquifer."

Oakes also runs an agriculture and viticulture tour company called AgVenture Tours.

Despite the abundant underground aquifer, nearly every industry in Monterey County is feeling the effects of low rainfall and drought conditions -- some in ways that are not so obvious, and others in ways that are painfully so.

What's true for row crops, for example, isn't true for vineyards. At Paraiso Vineyards in the Santa Lucia Highlands, the lack of rain and overhead irrigation (Paraiso, like most wineries, has switched to drip irrigation) means salt is building up in the soil.

"It's a different type of crisis for the vineyards. We have plenty of water for the most part and we can go through a drought because of our underground water. What hurts us is not having rainfall," said Jason Smith, general manager of Paraiso. "We have salt toxicity problems and those are difficult to manage."

Smith said the problems occur because plants take in the salt, which in turn burns the vines and reduces yields. Last year, Paraiso didn't start irrigating until April. This year, the winery started irrigation in January to drive down salt accumulation, a result of low rainfall last winter.

"We're constantly on the chase with more water to get (the salt) out," Smith said. "You actually end up seeing a salt ring around where you irrigate. If you know about it ahead of time, you can manage it ... we are preparing in the fall to run overhead irrigation to leach out the salt."

At the Bayonet and Black Horse Golf Courses in Seaside, the greens are as lush as ever, a tribute to the wisdom of the course having its own wells. But general manager Joe Priddy, who also sits on the board of the Monterey County Golf Association, said the courses are installing all new irrigation systems that will be able to move water more efficiently.

"Due to the soil we have currently, the water percolates rather quickly and we find ourselves doing more hand watering than what we normally do, but not necessarily everything needs water," Priddy said.

There are so many micro-climates on the Monterey Peninsula, though, that Priddy said what is true for Bayonet and Black Horse might not be true everywhere. A course 30 miles away might be blazing under 100-degree temperatures, whereas some Peninsula courses might be shrouded in fog.

"For those of us in the industry, water is always a concern. It's always a question of how we can be water friendly, and it's the big concern for all of California," he said. "The owners and operators are always aware of the amount of water they're using and how they can help the state with conservation."

Perhaps worst off is Monterey County's \$20 million cattle industry. Just weeks after Monterey County was declared a natural disaster area due to low rainfall and dry weather scorching pasturelands, the federal government will initiate a compensation program for ranchers who have lost the natural grasses on which their cattle feed.

Called the federal Livestock Compensation Program and run under the auspices of the United States Department of Agriculture, ranchers can receive a certain amount of money, based on the weight of their cattle, to compensate them for the losses of native pasturelands due to the drought.

In northern Monterey County, it's estimated that ranchers have lost 50 percent of the grasses on which their cattle feed, while in southern Monterey County, that number is an astonishing 90 percent, according to the USDA.

The grant-based program will begin Sept. 15; a low-interest emergency loan program was made available when the disaster was declared on Aug. 20, although so far few if any ranchers have applied for the loans.

In prior years of drought, ranchers were able to receive a maximum of \$40,000 under the Livestock Compensation Program, but that number may change this year, said Vivian Sosa, the executive director of the USDA's Farm Service Agency for Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Mateo Counties.

Ranchers generally only apply for the low-interest emergency loan program in times of mass disaster, such as a flood, she said.

"Right now, the guys I've talked to are so short on feed they are selling livestock or buying extra feed or moving their cattle to pastures in Northern California" where conditions aren't as bad, Sosa said.

"It depends on where in the county you are, but southern Monterey County is pretty bad. About 90 percent of the native grass normally there is gone. It's a wild-card function of the weather. 2005 and 2006 were two of the best rainfall years I've ever seen. It came at the right time and the grass germinated at the right time, but a couple of bad years in a row and it's gone."

Scott Violini, the former president of the Monterey County Cattlemen's Association, said many ranchers in the county have sold off up to 20 percent of their herd -- mostly the older cows -- but in southern Monterey County, there have been total herd liquidations.

In good rainfall years when natural grasses are plentiful, a cow might eat only 1,500 pounds of hay. In years such as this, cows are eating two tons. And when hay costs \$200 a ton and a cow only sells for about \$600, making money from cattle ranching is becoming an increasingly difficult proposition.

Violini declined to say how many cattle he raises -- "That's like telling you how much money I have in the bank," he joked -- but said the average size of a livestock operation in Monterey County is about 500 head of cattle.

"Those of us in the rangelands pretty much have to rely on what Mother Nature gives us. Even with the best management practices we utilize and the educational seminars we attend, the best practices in the world aren't going to help you when you have no water to grow grass and feed your cows," said Violini, whose family has farmed and ranched in the Salinas Valley since 1890.