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California, Drenched by Winter Rain, Is Told 'Drought's Over'

By Matt Stevens

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After six years of a prolonged drought in California, it is all but over. On Friday, Gov. Jerry Brown ended the drought emergency for the vast majority of the state. The drought had reduced Folsom Lake, a major reservoir in Northern California, to less than a third of its capacity in 2015, and all but wiped out the Sierra Nevada snowpack.

Friday's announcement, though, was about as symbolic as it was pragmatic. It marked the formal end to a water shortage that had already been erased by a winter of plentiful rain and snow. Many of the state's most stringent drought rules were eased months ago.

Mr. Brown declared a drought state of emergency in January 2014 as the state suffered through one of the driest years in its history. Then, in April 2015, he took to a barren field that typically would have been covered with snow to order a 25 percent reduction in urban water use.



Gov. Jerry Brown near Echo Summit, Calif., in 2015, where he announced the reduction in urban water use. Rich Pedroncelli/Associated Press

As the drought dragged on, state officials worked to craft and then enforce rules aimed at restricting how much water Californians could use — and what they could use it for.

To help urban dwellers cut their water consumption, many California water suppliers set up rebate programs to get residents to rip out their thirsty lawns and to replace them with drought-tolerant foliage and ground cover using alternate materials, like gravel.



The front yard of a home in Granada Hills, Calif., in 2015. Monica Almeida/The New York Times

But the state's hydrologic picture brightened significantly beginning in October 2016, when a series of massive storms drenched Northern California. The rain and snow continued through the winter, swelling major reservoirs to the point that officials were forced to make releases.

Meanwhile, the state's snowpack made an impressive recovery. As of Friday, the water content in the state's snowpack was about 160 percent of what is considered normal for this time of year. By comparison, the snowpack was reported as about 5 percent of average the day Mr. Brown stood on the barren field and ordered mandatory water conservation.



A snowblower cleared snow in Mammoth Lakes, Calif., in March. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Consequently, Mr. Brown lifted the drought emergency on Friday for all but four Central California counties — Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Tuolumne — which were among the hardest hit.

According to the order, Californians managed to slash their water use by more than 22 percent between June 2015 and January 2017. And even as state officials unveiled a plan to continue water conservation in the years ahead, some prohibitions against wasteful water practices — like hosing off a sidewalk — will remain.

“This drought emergency is over, but the next drought could be around the corner,” Mr. Brown said in a statement. “Conservation must remain a way of life.”

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