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Opinion: How storms will impact San Jose residents' water bills

Rain may lower water bills in the short term, but we're not out of the woods yet



Students walk in the rain at San Jose State in San Jose, on Feb. 27. (Shae Hammond/Bay Area News Group)

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The recent series of storms that swept through the region wrought havoc in many ways, but they did improve water levels in California. Without minimizing widespread storm damage and attending hardship, it is nice to see the hills green again and hope the rainy trend continues.

It's also a great relief to note that statewide Sierra snowpack was registering at nearly 200% of normal levels at the beginning of February, and that preliminary reservoir gauge readings published for the Santa Clara Valley Water District's 10 local reservoirs at the same time showed five of those reservoirs at or above 80% capacity.

And as reported in The Mercury News on Jan. 12: "For the first time in more than two years, the majority of California is in moderate drought, not severe drought."

That is all wonderful news, and it is not surprising that a lot of San Jose Water (SJW) customers and other residents across the region are wondering whether drought restrictions will ease or if they can expect their water bills to lower after the latest storms.

The answer is maybe in the short term, but we're not out of the woods yet for the long haul.

The average San Jose Water customer's usage will probably be down this month, considering that the rain allowed people to turn off things like outdoor irrigation. That could immediately lower part of a water bill, but other charges remain unaffected and are still required to support essential services such as treatment, transport and infrastructure.

Even when rain falls freely from the sky, consumable water can be costly to collect, cleanse and deliver to homes and businesses. San Jose Water invests heavily in meticulous long-range planning, continuous maintenance and quality control, preemptive infrastructure modernization and tight coordination with myriad water agencies and related entities to ensure its customers are buffeted from extreme fluctuations in costs, as well as the types of water service disruptions and contamination disasters that have recently plagued many municipalities across the nation.

As a quality water retailer, SJW does not independently set usage rates, nor does it control all the water supply in its service area. All rates are regulated by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), which requires detailed accounting and justification for any changes. SJW is also subject to cost-of-service determined by its primary wholesale supplier, the Santa Clara Valley Water District, which is subject to a host of variables including state and federal water project management policies and projects.

And we are all at the mercy of the climate.

Even though the recent atmospheric river conditions may have seemed like a huge water accumulation, we have to acknowledge that the past two decades have marked the region's worst drought in 1,200 years.

Our current conditions have improved from "extreme" to "moderate" drought, but as the U.S. Drought Monitor notes, "despite these improvements, long-term drought persists across much of the West."

The National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) explains, "Severe hydrologic and ecological drought indicators — such as depleted groundwater aquifers and reservoirs and changes in the condition of plants (such as trees), ecosystem processes, and wildlife — can take months to years of normal to above-normal precipitation to recover."

The recent rain has been great in helping to replenish our local water supply and top-level soil moisture. The National Weather Service reports that we might even see more significant precipitation. And San Jose Water customers already have done an admirable job in making water conservation a way of life: In November last year, we recorded a 19.8% reduction in cumulative use relative to 2020 levels.

Surveyors from the California Department of Water Resources will continue monthly monitoring of Sierra snow accumulation and water content, which typically peaks in April. Those measurements will help gauge the state's expected water supply for the rest of the year.

Whatever the result, the drought is most definitely not "over." San Jose Water continues to encourage our customers to keep up their conservation efforts. And we will continue to sustainably provide safe and reliable drinking water — as we have for 150 years.

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