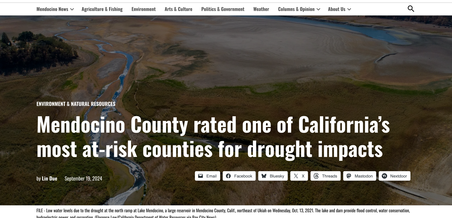

ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES

Mendocino County rated one of California's most at-risk counties for drought impacts

by Lia Usu | September 19, 2024

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FIG1 - Low water levels due to the drought at the north ramp at Lake Mendocino, a large reservoir in Mendocino County, Calif., northeast of Ukiah on Wednesday, Oct. 13, 2021. The lake and dam provide flood control, water conservation, hydroelectric power, and recreation. (Forrest Lee/California Department of Water Resources via Bay City News)

MENDOCINO CO., 9/17/24 — During a public workshop on Sept. 5 of the group producing Mendocino County's Drought Resilience Plan (DRP), two consultants tag-teamed to present a grim picture of the county's ability to survive prolonged drought. The group was formed to satisfy 2021's state Senate Bill 552, which requires all counties to plan and respond to drought and water emergencies. As Laura Garza, a University of California water and climate change advisor pointed out, the first part of creating a plan is understanding the lay of the land — or in this case, the state of the county's groundwater.

Garza and Andree Lee, from EKI Environment and Water, cities, tribes, water district representatives and others, are all members of a County Drought Task Force (CDTF) formed to address what is likely to become a worsening problem. The first two objectives of the task force, the results of which will be presented to the Board of Supervisors on September 25, were to gather data (how serious is the problem) and assess vulnerabilities (can communities deal with the problem). So far, the answers are disheartening.

The dry shore of Lake Mendocino near Ukiah, Calif. on March 15, 2021. (Jack "Jethro" Bowers/The Mendocino Voice)

Everyone who lives in Mendocino County knows that droughts are cyclical. They seem to come around every two or three years and may last for a couple years or longer. Droughts are measured in intensity, depending upon several factors, including the length of the drought and how crops, pasture and natural waterways are impacted. Since 1980, there have been around six moderate droughts, verging into the exceptional drought between 2013-2014. But starting in 2020, the county has seen an almost unending stretch of extreme to exceptional drought until this year. Drought is becoming more frequent and more intense with few respites that allow groundwater, creeks, pastures and agricultural fields to recover.

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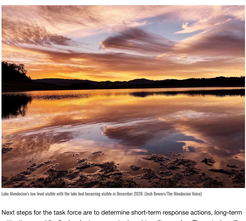
Part of the county's unique vulnerability is that so many residents depend upon wells or springs for household and agricultural water, and those sources are often the first to go dry in an extended drought. And unfortunately, as the pattern of dry years becomes more concentrated, the less time groundwater has to replenish before thirsty well pumps compete to draw it up into tanks.

The task force gathered data on specific categories, such as dry well susceptibility, ground water level decline, risk of wildfire, and more, divided by supervisorial district. Districts 4 and 5, along the coast, had high risk factors for household water outages and dry wells, while all the districts had high wildfire risk, resulting in a high physical vulnerability across the board. Essentially everyone on a well or on small water systems is at high risk for various factors. The task force found 42 small water systems in the county, with 88 percent showing high vulnerability to drought.



Lake Mendocino's low level visible with the lake bed becoming visible in December 2020. (Jack Bowers/The Mendocino Voice)

Next steps for the task force are to determine short-term response actions, long-term mitigations, and finally developing a county drought resilience plan. Those tasks will follow the presentation to the Board of Supervisors on Sept. 25 at 9 a.m. at the board chambers in Ukiah.

At the meeting on Sept. 5, task force members repeatedly cited public engagement as a goal to planning. Around 25 people attended on Zoom or in person at the University of California Cooperative Extension Farm Advisor building in Ukiah. Those at the meeting brought up issues such as what coastal towns can do about water, noting that in some areas 90% of people had to haul water during the last drought while 70% had mandatory restrictions and over 40% suffered from cleaned wells. Others had moratoriums on well drilling. One person talked about the housing crisis, how new construction is restricted because there is already insufficient water to support new homes. And what no one mentioned is the possibility, long predicted by social scientists and activists, of climate refugees coming to the county, especially to the coast. How will those people find water?

The puzzle — and the stakes — seem overwhelming.

To see frightening trends, a list of the most vulnerable areas in the county as well as specific risks, view the September 5 Task Force PowerPoint presentation.

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8 Comments

Richard Rosa

September 19, 2024 at 1:45 PM

Why would not 100% of the counties citizens not be fighting to save Scott Dam and Lake Pillsbury? Where do you think Lake Mendocino's water come from? Cheers

Reply

Ryan

September 23, 2024 at 2:33 PM

Because it only benefits a small number of the county's citizens, most of them wealthy grape growers.

Lora Hruby

September 19, 2024 at 3:14 PM

SAVE LAKE PILLSBURY,SCOTT'S DAM!!! WE THE PEOPLE NEED THIS LAKE!

Reply

Gail S

September 19, 2024 at 3:40 PM

There is too little effort made for rainwater catchment. Collecting rainwater for plant and landscape irrigation is an option we employ to help conserve potable water for household uses.

Reply

Ryan

September 19, 2024 at 8:06 PM

Yup, the only solution to Mendocino using more water than it has is clearly to take it from other nearby counties that are also impacted by drought. Spending hundreds of millions to retrofit seismically unsafe dams is a boondoggle that is absolutely not worth the money and would only benefit the wine industry and few of the counties residents the rely primarily on wells.

Reply

Keep It Re

September 20, 2024 at 4:03 PM

It will be far more costly to tear down the Eel River Dams and build alternative water storage infrastructure than to modernize and retrofit Scott Dam. Sonoma Water and Mendocino Inland Water and Power are working with PG&E now to obtain the Potter Valley Project diversion facilities and water rights in the hopes they can continue to divert water from the Eel to the Russian River during "high flows." Without Scott Dam, there will be no water to divert and Lake Mendocino will not fill.

Keep it Real

September 20, 2024 at 4:04 PM

It will be far more costly to tear down the Eel River Dams and build new alternative water storage infrastructure than it would be to modernize and retrofit Scott Dam. Sonoma Water and Mendocino Inland Water and Power are working with PG&E now to obtain the Potter Valley Project diversion facilities and water rights in the hopes they can continue to divert water from the Eel to the Russian River during "high flows." Without Scott Dam, there will be no water to divert and Lake Mendocino will not fill.

Angelcat

September 20, 2024 at 9:50 AM

Save Lake Pillsbury. Saving any water storage is crucial to our future. Animals (Bears, Deer, Elk, Bald Eagles, Otters, Trout etc.) fish and birds also need water at end of summer months. Why doesn't anyone care about the devastating effects of a lake being emptied has when lake has supported wildlife since 1922?? Fire suppression with water drops creates fire lones and saves homes.

Reply

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