ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES

Work on Mendocino drought resilience plan continues

by Susan Nash
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Low water levels due to drought at Lake Mendocino, a large reservoir in Mendocino County, Calif., northeast of Ukiah on October 13, 2021. It covers 1,922 acres and was formed by the construction of Coyote Valley Dam in 1958. (Terrence Lee/California Department of Water Resources via Bay City News)

FORT BRAGG, 2/25/24 —The Mendocino County Water Agency (MCWA) held its second public workshop on drought resilience planning in Fort Bragg on February 21st.

The workshops are part of the County's response to SB 522, signed into law in September 2021, requiring each county to prepare a drought resistance plan (DRP) for state small water systems and domestic well owners. At the first workshop, in September of 2024, consultants working on the plan pointed out that Mendocino County is rated one of the counties most at risk for drought impacts in the entire state.

Dr. Laura Garza, a University of California water and climate change advisor and part of the county's Drought and Water Storage Task Force, began the workshop by pointing out that droughts are normal, recurrent climate features that have been exacerbated and accelerated by climate change. During the 2020-2022 drought, Mendocino was one of the first counties declared to be in a drought emergency.

Laura Garza, University of California Cooperative Extension Water and Climate Advisor, presented an update on the Drought Resilience Plan for Mendocino County at a public workshop on Friday, Feb. 21, 2025 in Fort Bragg, Calif.

The draft DRP, scheduled to be completed in late March, will contain data and vulnerability assessments, drought preparation strategies, and a plan for implementing them.

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The data itself is sobering. There are 7,972 domestic wells in Mendocino County. One-third are less than 100 feet deep and thus particularly vulnerable. There are 27 small separate water systems, defined as having between five and 14 connections. Eighty-four percent of the domestic wells (so, 6,696) and 93% of the state small water systems are at high risk of being affected by drought.

The DRP will contain monitoring strategies – e.g., the number of dry well reports over any 3-month period – as well as actions needed, like identifying more emergency drinking water supplies, for the inevitable severe drought.

Although there is a fair amount of bureaucratic jargon coming out of all this – the number of agencies involved in preparing the DRP is a veritable alphabet soup, and there were two full slides on how to write a coherent public comment – the bottom line is important. Mendocino County will face more droughts, lots of them, and preparation is important.

But people have short memories. Only two members of the public attended the workshop at Fort Bragg's Veterans Memorial Building in person, with another 17 on Zoom. There were virtually no public comments. Has the recent spate of storms created a false sense of security?

Asked what people should take away from the workshop, Amir Mani, from consulting firm EKI Environment and Water, summed it up: "It's all about being better prepared than before, and it starts with education."

More chances for public engagement and for getting ready are coming up. The County's task force will meet on February 26, 2025, from 9 am to noon in the Board of Supervisors chambers in Ukiah, with remote participation available. For more information about the meeting and to receive DRP updates, visit the MWCA's drought portal.

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