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Nevada budget cuts means end for rainmakers

Institute says it had gotten 5-15 percent more snow from winter storms



Desert Research Institute via AP

Tom Swafford, left, and Bryan Loss dismantle cloud seeding equipment at Alpine Meadows outside Truckee, Calif., on Aug. 7.

AP Associated Press

updated 9:18 a.m. PT, Mon., Aug 17, 2009

RENO, Nev. - The most arid state in the nation is about to become drier.

Nevada will lose enough water to supply 130,000 households annually because the state's cloud-seeding program is being closed due to budget cuts.

Tom Swafford, field operations manager for the program, said 65,000 acre-feet of water a year will be lost, a reduction that will affect ranchers, recreation and wildlife. An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons, enough to cover an acre a foot deep or supply about two households for a year.

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The renowned program, operated by the Reno-based Desert Research Institute, squeezed 5 percent to 15 percent more snow from storms to

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increase the winter snowpack, which provides summertime water to the thirsty state, according to Swofford.

"That's a lot of water going away. It's kind of shortsighted for the driest state in the country," said Swofford, one of four program employees who will lose their jobs.

Nevada's average annual precipitation of 9.5 inches is by far the lowest in the nation, said Jim Ashby of the Western Regional Climate Center in Reno. Next are Utah at 12.22 inches and Wyoming at 12.92 inches.

\$550,000 a year

DRI President Stephen Wells said he was forced to cut the cloud-seeding program because of 15 percent cuts imposed by the cash-strapped state. Cloud-seeding was DRI's largest single state-funded program at an annual cost of \$550,000. About \$10 million of the research institute's \$50 million-plus budget comes from the state.

"To get to \$2 million-plus in cuts, it requires some large-ticket items that didn't hurt our core mission of the highest quality of research in environmental sciences," Wells said of the nonprofit research center that is part of Nevada's higher education system.

While important, Wells said the program wasn't as critical as some others.

"It makes me sick to my stomach to cut it," he said.

Dan Gralian, president of the Nevada Cattlemen's Association, said cloud-seeding has a proven record in helping nourish grassy rangelands for livestock and wildlife.

"I'm really disappointed," he said. "If we can get more moisture from every bit of clouds that go over us, it'll do us a lot of good in this arid environment we have."

The program's demise also mean less irrigation water for hay that sustains cattle over winter, said Mike Riordan, an Elko County rancher. That will force ranchers to buy more hay or trim herd sizes, he said.

As a world leader in wintertime, cloud-seeding technology, DRI draws experts from around the globe in search of its expertise, said Joe Busto, a physical science researcher for the Colorado Water Conservation Board in Denver.

The institute pioneered the research and development of modern cloud-seeding generators and equipment, Busto said, and their design has been copied worldwide.

"This program cut has kind of more national and global implications because other states and countries have relied on DRI's expertise," Busto said.

Program started in 1970s

The institute, which has 300 research projects under way on several continents, launched the cloud-seeding program in the 1970s and began receiving state funding for it in the early 1980s.

Now, more than 25 countries have similar programs, including Australia, Canada, China and India. In the U.S., California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah and Wyoming do cloud-seeding.

DRI operated six cloud-seeding generators in the Sierra Nevada range and 23 generators in Nevada, Swofford said. The mountaintop generators released silver iodide particles into clouds to coax more moisture from storms in northern Nevada where the state's agricultural activity is centered.

The cut is occurring at a time when Nevada is in a drought, and when



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other Western states are either expanding or starting cloud-seeding programs, Swofford said.

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"It's particularly shortsighted when you realize it's not like a light switch," he said. "You can't turn it off and then in two years turn it on again. The people with expertise will be gone."

The cattlemen's association, Nevada Farm Bureau and Elko County Commission have urged lawmakers to save the program. A spokesman for Gov. Jim Gibbons said they should contact the Board of Regents, which sets priorities for the state's higher education system.

"Our state budget is just hanging on. It's up to regents how that money is spent," said Dan Burns, acknowledging that regents are challenged by the budget crunch.

Wells said he's seeking alternative funding to save the program but faces slim odds because of the poor economy. He said he particularly wants to continue cloud-seeding in the Walker River watershed to try to help save Walker Lake, about 130 miles south of Reno. The lake has been dying a low death for more than a century, robbed of its lifeblood by drought, agriculture and evaporation.

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