Six-year drought continues to plague Western United States golf courses

By Peter Blais

The early-season precipitation news has been positive for Southern California — site of this year's GCSAA International show — although the six-year drought is far from over.

The Southern California Metropolitan Water District reported precipitation was slightly above the normal 12 to 14 inches for the region for the year ending Sept. 30.

Additionally, forecasters predicted December weather patterns would bring heavy rainfalls to the coast, an encouraging start to the area's prime four-month wet season.

But two-thirds of Southern California's water is imported, according to water district spokesman Bob Gomperz. And there the news is mixed.

"We've been told we'll receive as much as the aqueducts can handle from the Colorado River basin. But Northern California [primarily dependent on Sierra Nevada Mountains snowpack] is giving us just 10 percent of what we requested," Gomperz said.

Gomperz said the Northern California allotment figure is preliminary. It could go higher when final figures are released in May, particularly if heavy early-December snows, which helped snowpack levels reach 50 percent of normal, continue through the winter, Gomperz said.

Does that have the golf industry ready to burst into a chorus of "Ding dong the drought is dead?"

No way, Dorothy. "It's rained heavily in spots. But the

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West's dry spell is expected to last into the foreseeable future

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idea the drought is over is a mis-

conception of the media," said Ray

Davies, superintendent at Virginia

Country Club in Huntington

Beach and past president of the

Southern California Golf Course

Superintendents Association.

For example, Virginia CC re-

ceived 1/2-inch of rain in a recent

24-hour storm, Davies said.

Courses 40 miles north in the Los

Angeles Basin got 6 to 8 inches.

But most of the water in both

areas simply ran off into the ocean,

he said.

And since no major water re-
tention projects have been built

since the late 1960s, most heavy

rains will continue to simply wash

into the ocean, he added.

"California has a permanent

water shortage. We simply don't

have the capacity to store what we

get," Davies said.

Bob Thomas, editor of the

Southern California Golf Associa-
tion magazine Fore, said the

idea the drought is over is a mis-

conception. "It's down 40 to 50 feet. That's

a major water source for that part

of the state," he said.

Farther east in Las Vegas, the

water district has raised the price

of water significantly to curb wa-
ter use, Gilhuly said. Nevada Gov.

Bob Miller declared 14 of the

state's 17 counties drought disas-

ters. "That was never the case in

L.A.," he recalled. "Every time I
drive through Northern Californi-
a, I can't believe how low Lake

Shasta is.

"It's down 40 to 50 feet. That's a

major water source for that part

of the state."

The news is worse farther north and

east, according to U.S. Golf

Association agronomist Larry

Gilhuly. Golf courses on city wa-
ter in Seattle and Portland were

restricted to watering just tees

and greens this summer and fall, he

said.

"That never happened before.

That was never the case in

1990."

Another heavier-than-normal

year of rainfall will get most of the

state's reservoirs and water tables

back to normal, he added.

"There is plenty of water. The

major issue now is quality. We

need to make sure the chemicals

put down on the ground don't con-
taminate the water," Gowan said.