

5 THINGS TO KNOW!

About the Mid-Winter Outlook 2023-24

**Kevin Hostert, Senior Water Resources Analyst
Municipal Water District of Orange County**

Did you know? Despite El Niño conditions in Northern California, the region has experienced below-average rainfall and snowfall levels. However, there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon, as an anticipated Atmospheric River offers prospects for improved precipitation. Despite recent minor improvements, the Colorado River system, which supplies much of Orange County's (OC) water, faces ongoing challenges.

OC continues to stand out with low local water usage, reducing its dependence on imported water sources. The county's

groundwater basin continues to be healthy, bolstering the local water supply and reducing reliance on imported sources. This improvement reflects the good water stewardship among OC's residents. These noteworthy points highlight the complex dynamics of water management in California, where climate conditions and conservation efforts significantly impact the sustainability of water resources.

Here are five (5) key topics to keep your eye on as we move into the second half of winter:

1

IMPORTED WATER STORAGE LEVELS REMAIN HEALTHY.

Despite a slow start to the rainy season, state and federal reservoirs are at robust levels due to abundant rain and snow in the previous water year. As of late January 2024, Lake Oroville is at 132% of its average storage. While San Luis Reservoir lags at 82% of the historical average, an impending Atmospheric River in early February can potentially bolster the State Water Project [Table A percentage](#), currently at 10%.

2

LONG-TERM SUPPLY ISSUES PERSIST.

Despite a promising water year in 2023, the Colorado River Basin continues its over two-decade decline. Snowfall in the basin currently stands at about 75% of the average, with hopes for improvement from the forecasted Atmospheric River.

3

IMPORTED WATER USAGE REMAINS HISTORICALLY LOW.

OC has seen a significant decline in imported water usage over the past two (2) decades, with MWDOC importing only half of its 2000s water volume. This trend is consistent throughout SoCal, with a 40% decrease in imported usage since the mid-1990s. Reduced reliance on imported water helps mitigate drought impacts on regional reservoirs.

4

EL NIÑO BRINGS UNCERTAINTY.

Despite El Niño conditions, the anticipated wet winter has yet to materialize fully. However, with approximately half of the rainy season remaining, there is still potential for increased rainfall. El Niño is projected to diminish by Spring 2024.

5

OC'S LOCAL SUPPLY IS ROBUST.

Regardless of winter precipitation, OC's water supply remains resilient. The OC Groundwater Basin, which supplies north and Central OC with 85% of its water, has maintained its "ideal" level for nearly a year. No significant drawdown is projected in the near future.

