

For Eye on the Environment, February 2, 2016

More Rain Coming, Catch it with Rain Barrels!

By Lara Meeker

So far, Southern California has not seen the back-to-back deluges highly anticipated with this year's strong El Niño. Last Sunday's storm dumped snow on the Sierras, and thrashed Southern California with high winds, but Ventura's lower lying communities got less than a half inch of rain in the brief shower.

Ventura County's total rainfall to date this season is still below 60% of normal. But don't lose confidence in El Niño yet. Curt Kaplan, meteorologist in the National Weather Service's Oxnard office, says, "We still have a very strong El Niño set up in the Pacific... and it's still encouraging. We'll see quite a few storms come through between now and the end of March and even April".

With a little preparation you can make the most of these rainfall events by storing rainwater for the drier days ahead. Most experts agree that one El Niño winter will not end California's historic drought. We are running a 5-year precipitation deficit heading into this wet season. Continuing to capture and conserve water when it does rain can help our communities increase their water supply and reliability.

Water agencies and cities are looking for opportunities to store water instead of letting all of it run to the ocean through storm drains. Residents can do the same on a smaller scale. Water falling on our roofs is a resource.

Barrels and cisterns can collect rainwater, saving thousands of gallons of water. The roof space of the average two-car garage yields 360 gallons of water from just 1" of rain. Each time a rain barrel fills up, that's water you can use on gardens instead of paying for precious water out of your tap.

Rain barrels allow gardeners to collect and reuse rainwater on their plants. In some areas of the county, tap water is filled with minerals such as calcium and magnesium that can cause it to be more alkaline. This water, known as hard water, can affect plants negatively, browning avocado leaves, for example. Water captured in rain barrels is healthier for plants because it's free of salts and minerals often found in municipal treated water. Using rainwater also saves energy by not requiring water to be pumped from reservoirs to your home. Moving water is the single largest use of electricity in California.

In addition to saving water and saving money, rain barrels also help to protect our watershed and ocean. For decades, urban areas have been built to direct rain and the runoff it produces away from buildings and off of streets through storm drains, discharging quickly into the nearest river or the ocean. The hard surfaces in our urban areas produce runoff. Urban stormwater runoff is not only wasted water, it's also a leading cause of river and ocean pollution. Capturing rainwater and using it on your property keeps that water

from flowing through streets and washing pollutants like pesticides and oil into rivers, creeks and ocean.

To help residents keep an eye on the environment with tools to conserve water and prevent stormwater pollution, Ventura County's Community for Clean Watersheds is offering county residents 50-gallon rain barrels for \$75 plus tax; barrels normally retail for \$149. Go to www.rainbarrelprogram.org/venturacounty to pre-purchase barrels by March 6, and also go to www.socalwatersmart.org to check if you're eligible for additional rebates, up to the full \$75 cost. All rain barrels must be picked up during a one-day event on March 12. Residents have a choice between Ventura or Thousand Oaks pick-up locations. To order over the phone or request a mail-in order form call (919) 835-1699 and request the Ventura County rain barrel program discount. Rain barrels are easy to connect to downspouts from rain gutters. For questions about the rain barrel program contact Lara Meeker at lara.meeker@ventura.org.

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On the web:

www.cleanwater.org

Order rain barrels at www.rainbarrelprogram.org/venturacounty