

THE SHASTA SUN

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Shasta County, California

A WHITE LIE

Snow melt from Mount Shasta, California's tallest volcano at 14,180 feet, is the largest source of water for Shasta Lake, the largest reservoir in the state. But water is being used from the lake much faster than the mountain's thin snow cover can replace it. The lake is 100 feet below full pool and dropping 6 inches a day. **STORY INSIDE**

A WHITE LIE

Emily and I climbed to the top of California's second-tallest volcano, Lassen Peak, this weekend.

Few Americans live in a place where, on any day of the year, they can see snow.

The ones who do live in places from Colorado to the west. When they look up into the high mountains, they see more than snow. They see the water they will drink and irrigate their crops with.

In California this year, what they see is a lie.

Emily and I climbed into the snow this weekend at Lassen Peak – that will be the subject of my Fourth of July national park newsletter – but being in

summer snow hides the reality of our water situation.

Even though some snow will linger all summer, there was only a fifth of the usual snow pack in the mountains last winter, the third in a row with skimpy precip.

Central Valley agriculture, which drinks 80 percent of the state's water, will suffer the most. Lost lawns are nothing compared to crops that can't be planted or orchards that

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The size of cars parked on the sandbar gives scale to what 100 feet below full pool means at Shasta Lake.

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don't produce fruit and nuts.

Ranchers who can afford it are chasing a rapidly falling water table with wells drilled as deep as 2,500 feet. Land is sinking a foot a year in some parts of the valley because water in the aquifer for centuries is now being brought to the surface faster than winter-only rains can replace it.

Where the problem is undeniably obvious to the naked eye is in reservoirs like Shasta Lake, impounded by dams built in the 1930s and '40s,

where the water levels have been dropping for three years.

Shasta, near the Oregon border, is the largest reservoir in California, with 17 percent of the state's reservoir capacity. It sends water as far as 700 miles south to San Diego on the Mexico border.

Shasta's 600-foot tall dam was designed to be 200 feet taller – creating a reservoir with

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triple the current volume – but World War II shortages of manpower and materials prevented that. Now there are plans to raise it 18½ feet, increasing capacity 14 percent, for \$1 billion.

There's much arguing between agriculture that

claims it deserves more of the state's dwindling supply of water and urban residents who subsidize its cost. There is talk in the legislature of new dams.

But it's much ado about nothing when the changing climate fails to fill the reservoirs and aquifers we have.

Cars are parked on dry land that has turned Beaver Island into a peninsula at Bridge Bay Resort on Shasta Lake.