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Dip in reservoir levels, El Nino forecast fuel winter crop concerns

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Water levels in India's 146 key reservoirs have dipped 35% on-year to 61,807 billion cubic metres, against a total storage capacity of 178,185 bcm, according to the latest bulletin of the Central Water Commission, fuelling worries over winter crops, food security and inflation.

This comes amid the possibility of the warm water phenomenon El Nino weighing on the south-west monsoon this year. While the India Meteorological

Department predicts a normal monsoon, private forecaster Skymet sees below-normal rainfall at a time when foodgrain stocks have declined to a six-year low as of 1 April to 33.2 million tonnes.

"Falling reservoir levels are a concern as it affects water supply for drinking, cattle and sowing. With levels falling there will be priority given to cattle and drinking and this can lead to delays in sowing. Hence the arrival of monsoon and adequate rainfall is important," said Madan Sabnavis, chief economist at Bank of Baroda.

As per the CWC, the water



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storage level is only 28% of capacity at 40 reservoirs in Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, among others. They were 33% in 21 key reservoirs

in the eastern regions.

In the case of western, central and northern regions, available water storage in major reservoirs as of Thurs-

day was 36%, 42% and 37%, respectively.

The likelihood of El Niño conditions developing later this year is increasing, warned the World Meteorological Organization on Wednesday, asking the world to prepare for it. A map issued by it on anticipated rainfall patterns globally during El Niño years indicated most parts of north, northeast, northwest, and central India experiencing dry periods during the June-September monsoon season. It shows largely wet months during the October to December northeast monsoon season in the peninsular region.

"Unseasonal rains are not that heavy that can fill up reservoirs as they are sporadic and centered in some regions, besides they last for a day or two. The only way they can fill up is if the monsoon is normal and on time, Sabnavis said.

The monsoon season that begins on 1 June is crucial to India's agriculture sector and one of the mainstays of its economy. It brings about 70% of India's annual rainfall. Monsoon spurs agriculture produce and improves rural spending. Monsoon rains are a lifeline for about 60% of the country's net cultivated area, which has no irrigation.

The monsoon impacts inflation, jobs and industrial demand. Good agricultural production keeps food inflation in check, while ample harvests boost rural incomes and help inject demand into the economy. "The concern is not over kharif sowing as we have been witnessing monsoon rainfall for the past few days. We have seen torrential rainfall in March that may be beneficial for kharif sowing," said Ashok Gulati, an agriculture economist. "The concern lies over rainfall during October and November before rabi crops cultivation, which is dependent on irrigation."