

All of state pulls out of drought

By JEREMY PELZER - Star-Tribune capital bureau | Posted: Tuesday, November 3, 2009 1:00 pm |



Water droplets hang from the needles of a lodgepole pine after a wet snowfall in the Bridger-Teton National Forest near Jackson recently. October moisture came on top of abundant precipitation in the spring and summer across Wyoming. (Mark Gocke/Star-Tribune correspondent)

CHEYENNE -- Thanks to wet, cool weather throughout Wyoming much of the year, the state will head into winter drought-free for the first time in nine years.

That hasn't been good news to Bruce James, a professional fishing guide in Jackson.

"It screwed up June because it was so wet," James said. "People just don't go on fishing trips when it's raining."

Too much rain has only recently become a problem again in Wyoming. A dry spell that started in the spring of 2001 peaked in January 2003, when the National Weather Service classified 99 percent of the state as experiencing extreme or exceptional drought.

Wet weather returned to the eastern and northwestern parts of Wyoming in the next couple of years. But the state has only been completely drought-free since June, after wet weather this spring ended drought conditions in southwest Wyoming.

This year has been wet across the state. Since October 2008, the National Weather Service has recorded normal to above-average precipitation totals for rangelands and basins in almost every part of Wyoming. As a result, the state's reservoirs have benefitted -- water levels for most are at or above historical averages.

Above-average mountain snowpack last winter gave way to above-average streamflows that lasted well into summer -- to James' dismay.

"It's the ugly truth: What's good for the skiers isn't good for the fishermen, as far as business goes," James said.

But that hasn't always been true this year -- at least not for the White Pine Ski Resort outside of Pinedale.

Last year, the ski resort received a normal level of snow for the first time in several ski seasons, said Stuart Thompson, the resort's general manager.

"And that was good as far as weather was concerned," Thompson said.

But when summer came and the resort opened its doors for mountain biking, horse riding and conferences, the wet weather didn't go away.

"This summer, the amount of rain and precipitation that we had probably didn't help our visitation because it rained for 27 days in June," Thompson said.

This winter, a moderate El Nino system will likely cause dry conditions in northern Wyoming, said Arthur Meunier, a forecaster with the National Weather Service in Riverton. The southern half of the state, meanwhile, will likely see moderate precipitation levels.

As for the spring, he said, "There's a lot of uncertainty."

Thompson said he's just hoping for some consistency when it comes to rainfall. But he's ready for whatever ends up coming Wyoming's way.

"When Mother Nature doesn't produce what you're expecting," he said, "you've got to deal with it."

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