

Drought conditions improve

Better snowpack in mountains leads to more optimistic water outlook

By Keith E. Domke

Ranger Editor

Encouraging news keeps coming as the mountain snow keeps falling.

The latest statistics from the National Weather Service Riverton office show that the prolonged drought throughout Wyoming and Fremont County looks to be easing as the snowpack totals mount in the higher elevations. Several readings across the Cowboy State exceed normal amounts as the calendar reaches mid-April while measurements closer to home are very close to average.

“The latest U.S. drought monitor showed improvement across Wyoming,” read a statement from the local NWS office. “West Central Wyoming (including Fremont County) was classified as moderate drought.”

At the beginning of March, the National Weather Service said the area was classified as severe after being listed as extreme throughout much of the past several years. The D1, or moderate, drought classification is the most lenient, followed by D2 (severe) and D3 (extreme).

The report also said the Yellowstone National Park area of the state as well as the Big Horn Basin and the Powder and Tongue River basins now were absent of drought.

“Average snowpack for Wyoming as of April 7 was 102 percent,” the report stated, “with averages across West and Central Wyoming ranging from 92 percent in the upper Green River Basin to 121 percent across the Little Snake River Basin.”

In comparing snow-water equivalent statistics from April 2008 to April 2007, readings at every state reporting station were significantly better. The averages are based on all reporting snotel sites in the different basins and the percent of average is based on the 30-year period from 1971-2000.

The Wind River Basin currently sits at 97 percent of normal, compared to 71 percent a year ago. The figure was as high as 121 percent in the Little Snake River Basin compared to 65 percent in 2007. The Upper Green River and Lower North Platte River basins were the worst at 93 and 92 percent of normal, respectively, compared to 67 and 81 percent a year ago.

The Wind River, Upper Green River and Lower North Platte River basins were three of four locations across the state with below-normal averages with the Belle Fourche River Basin the other at 99 percent. However, a year ago at Belle Fourche, the percentage was 37. Overall, 13 drainage basins across the state are measured.

The United States Department of Agriculture’s April Wyoming Basin Outlook Report verified the NWS readings.

“Generally, the snow-water equivalent across Wyoming is slightly above average for April at 102 percent,” the USDA report reads.

It goes on to say that “forecasted runoff varies from 65 percent to 178 percent of average across Wyoming for an overall average of 98 percent. Basin reservoir levels for Wyoming vary from 29 percent to 172 percent of average for an overall average of 81 percent.”

Specifically and closer to home, snow-water equivalent in the Wind River above Dubois is 101 percent of average and 179 percent of last year’s level. The Little Wind River SWE is 95 percent of average water content, but 126 percent of last year. The Popo Agie drainage SWE is about 92 percent of average, but 123 percent of last year. The Wind River Basin SWE above Boysen Reservoir is about 96 percent of normal, but at 151 percent of last year.

The improved snowpack and precipitation levels also helped with fire danger readings. According to the NWS, fire danger currently is low in West and Central Wyoming.

Streamflows

According to the basin outlook, Dinwoody Creek near Burris is at 103,000 acre-feet, which is 110 percent of average. The Wind River above Bull Lake Creek is 550,000 acre-feet, or 103 percent of the norm. Bull Lake Creek near Lenore is at 160,000 acre-feet, which is 88 percent of average.

The Wind River near Riverton is at 635,000 acre-feet, or 99 percent of normal. The Little Popo Agie River near Lander is at about 47,000 acre-feet, or 89 percent of average. The South Fork of the Little Wind River near Fort Washakie will yield about 86,000 acre-feet, which is 102 percent of average. Near Riverton, the Little Wind

River is at 285,000 acre-feet, or 91 percent of the norm.

Boysen Reservoir inflow is expected to yield about 775,000 acre-feet, which is 96 percent of the average.

Reservoirs

Local reservoir storage remains below average, however, even compared to 2007 totals. At Bull Lake, usable storage is currently at about 56,800 acre feet, which is 54 percent of average and about 98 percent compared to last year at this time.

Boysen Reservoir is storing at about 62 percent of average at 407,600 acre-feet, which is about 96 percent compared to last year.

Pilot Butte is at 112 percent of average at 24,600 acre-feet, which is about 97 percent compared to a year ago.

Precipitation

Precipitation in the basin areas of Riverton and Lander remains below normal for the month and year as the higher amounts of snow have not accumulated in the lower levels.

In Riverton, at the regional airport, April precipitation only has measured .01 of an inch while measured moisture for 2008 is at exactly half an inch, which is about an inch below the 30-year average. Snowfall for the season is slightly above normal as 32.7 inches has accumulated, or 3.5 inches above average.

In Lander, .12-inch of precipitation has been recorded in April and 1.6 inches since Jan. 1, which is about 1.7 inches below the average. Snowfall numbers are at 76.5 inches for the season, which is about 10 inches below normal.

Outlook

The NWS outlook for May, June and July calls for a slight chance for above-normal temperatures across the area. As far as precipitation, there is no true indication of above or below normal amounts.