

Experts say it's too soon to worry about drought

By KELSEY DAYTON Casper Star-Tribune The Billings Gazette | Posted: Monday, January 9, 2012

LANDER, Wyo. — Old-time ranchers have a saying.

"In Wyoming, in this business, you're never more than one year away from a drought," said Jim Magagna, executive vice president of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association.

Despite the big weather-related question on everyone's mind — "Where's all the snow? — Magagna and other agriculture and weather experts say it's too soon to start worrying about whether the prophecy is true.

Wyoming's statewide snowpack average was 80 percent of normal Monday. It was 114 percent of normal a year ago, according to a media release from water supply specialist Lee Hackleman.

The state's current low is 52 percent of average in the Upper Bear River, and the high is 113 percent in the Powder-Tongue area. Last year there was a low of 93 percent and a high of 154 percent.

"It just means we're low now," Hackleman said. "What we are now doesn't really matter. It's what we are in the May that really counts."

Significant snow

Wyoming's significant snow months tend to be March, April and even May, said Harry LaBonde, deputy state engineer.

If there isn't much more snow, it could impact irrigators who have direct water rights when the irrigating season starts, which typically runs April through September, he said.

Irrigators who rely on stored water should have an adequate supply because most reservoirs were so high last year.

A small winter storm is expected to move across Wyoming on Tuesday night starting near Jackson and moving east and south, said Dan Berc, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Riverton.

The storm will bring minimal snow, about 3 inches in Casper and an inch in the Riverton area, he said.

"Mainly it's a minor nuisance snow," Berc said.

Moisture needed

The state does need significant moisture, Berc said. However, he agreed it's too soon to worry. There wasn't much snow yet at this time last year, he said.

"It's far too early to predict what we're going to be dealing with," he said.

Wyoming emerged from a decade of drought conditions two years ago, leaving Wyoming ranchers and farmers with "a little bit of nervousness," Magagna said.

On the positive side, less snow has meant many ranchers haven't had to feed livestock as much as usual.

There is concern among some sheep ranchers in the Red Desert area. Sheep do better on soft snow, which they eat, Magagna said. There is little snow left in the area and what is there has turned to ice.

Yet despite the old Wyoming saying, Magagna isn't worried. He's seen many winters where the state doesn't get large snowfalls until the end of January and into February.

"In the big picture I think it's a little early to be a big concern," he said. "Obviously if the winter continued his way, it could be a horrible thing."