

High water levels help irrigation

By Amber Peabody, Cody Enterprise



A field near Willwood Dam is flood irrigated recently. High water levels in the Buffalo Bill Dam the past two years have led to more water being released into the river. (Photo by Amber Peabody)

After an eight-year drought, deep snowpack the past two years has led to the Buffalo Bill Reservoir's highest inflow in several years.

"The last two years have been really good," Shoshone Irrigation District manager Bryant Startin said. "A better snowpack is what it's all about."

In 2006, Buffalo Bill Reservoir had an inflow of about 79,000 acre-feet (about 64 percent of average) with only 125,000 af of water released from the reservoir that July. (One acre-foot of water covers one acre of land one foot deep and is about 272,000 gallons.)

Water was low again the next year, but a good snowpack in 2008 led to a huge increase in inflows to the reservoir. In July 2008, the reservoir saw 320,000 af of inflow. While slightly lower in 2009, the July inflow of 220,000 af is still above average.

"In 2006 and 2007, all the water released was just for irrigation," Startin said. "This year and last

year, they've had to release extra water to keep water from going over the top of the dam."

As of Aug. 1, inflows into Buffalo Bill Reservoir were 1.61 million af for the year, which is 141 percent above average. The 30-year average is 755,000 af.

To deal with the higher inflows, the Bureau of Reclamation has had to release more water into the river. In July 2008, 270,000 af was released, while 195,000 af was released in July 2009.

"They began releasing extra water this year on April 1 and continued to do so until almost the end of July," Startin said.

The higher water inflows have been a relief to area farmers. Irrigators in the Heart Mountain, Willwood, Garland and Frannie divisions rely on water from Buffalo Bill Reservoir for their livelihood.

Residents of Cody, Powell, Lovell, Byron, Deaver and Frannie also depend on the reservoir for their drinking water via the Shoshone Municipal Pipeline.

Shoshone Irrigation - by the numbers

- The Shoshone Irrigation Project consists of 93,000 acres.
- It was completed in 1948 at a cost of \$2.25 million.
- There are:
 - 2,177 water users (for irrigation).
 - 140 miles of canals.
 - 573 miles of laterals.

- 589 miles of drainage system.

- Principal crops grown are beans, alfalfa, oats, corn, barley, sugar beets and pasture.

- Buffalo Bill Reservoir provides incidental flood control on the Shoshone River. The Shoshone Project has provided \$9 million in flood control benefits from 1950-99.

- Hydroelectric power produced on the project is fed into a grid system which serves an area extending into three states.