

North Platte reservoir storage in Wyo rises

## Drought relief

By BEN NEARY Associated Press writer | Posted: Tuesday, December 22, 2009 7:40 am |



A multi-layered snowdrift has formed downwind of snow fences along U.S. Highway 287 in southeast Wyoming. Reservoir storage has increased dramatically in the North Platte drainage in the past year, and state officials say they're optimistic that snowfall this winter will provide better-than-average spring runoff. (Ken Driese/Star-Tribune correspondent)

CHEYENNE -- Reservoir storage on the North Platte River in Wyoming is up significantly over the past two years, and state and federal officials say irrigators appear to be in good shape for the 2010 growing season and beyond.

John Lawson, manager of the Wyoming area office of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in Casper, said Monday that federal reservoirs on the North Platte held 1.7 million acre feet of water at the end of September. That's up from only about 700,000 acre feet in the same month two years earlier.

"We've seen a fairly dramatic, significant turnaround since two years ago," Lawson said. He said water managers calculate the water year from Sept. 30 because it's the end of the irrigation season.

In addition to increasing reservoir storage by 1 million acre feet over the past two years, Lawson emphasized that the reservoir system met all of its irrigation demands. An acre foot of water is about 325,000 gallons, the amount of water that covers an acre to a depth of a foot.

Most of the storage increase came in Seminoe and Pathfinder, the two biggest Wyoming reservoirs on the North Platte, Lawson said.

Seminoe had about 700,000 acre feet of water at the end of September, up from only about 200,000 acre feet for the same month in 2007, Lawson said. At full capacity, the reservoir holds just over 1 million acre feet of conservation storage, not counting space for flood control.

Pathfinder Reservoir held only about 170,000 acre feet two years ago but was also up to close to 700,000 acre feet by the end of this September, Lawson said. He said the reservoir also has a conservation capacity of just over 1 million acre feet.

Lawson said current storage in Seminoe Reservoir is 122 percent of the 30-year average while storage at Pathfinder Reservoir stands at 138 percent of the 30-year average.

Lawson credited above-average snowpack over the past two winters for increasing runoff into the North Platte drainage. He also said that rains this June contributed to higher runoff while lowering irrigation demand.

Current storage levels should give irrigators on the North Platte a leg up in the coming season, Lawson said. However, he said water conservation remains important.

"This system just seems to be on the bubble all the time," Lawson said. "All it takes is a couple of bad years and we're right back to the same kettle of soup we were in a few years ago."

Harry LaBonde, deputy Wyoming state engineer, said Monday that the significant increase in storage on the North Platte provides better security for the 2010 irrigation season.

LaBonde said current storage levels show that it has taken about two years to recover from the drought that started in about 2000.