

## Recent storms bring drought relief, threat of flooding



Water approaches a house as waters from the Middle Fork river rise after days of rain near Kaycee. Kaycee's fairgrounds were completely under water, and the river banks around town were piled with sand bags by local officials and volunteers. Photo by Dan Cepeda, Star-Tribune

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CHEYENNE -- Mountains around Wyoming are loaded with spring snow, leading some experts to believe that the state could be inching its way out of nearly a decade of drought.

But weather watchers are reading a different message into those shimmering white peaks.

"Flooding is something to watch for for probably four or five weeks here," said Don Day, meteorologist with Cheyenne-based Day Weather Inc.

Wyoming State Climatologist Steve Gray said mountain snow levels this year in most of the state are near historic averages -- a big improvement after seven to nine years of skimpy snowpacks.

Notably, the snowpack in the Little Snake River basin in south-central Wyoming was 130 percent of normal on Tuesday, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Several other major mountain basins around the state were carrying more snow than normal for this time of year, including 111 percent of average in the Upper North Platte River basin in southeastern Wyoming and 107 percent in the Snake River basin in far western Wyoming.

"What we're seeing now is what the historical record would call an average winter, but at this point in time we'll take it," Gray said. "After the last decade or so, something like this looks awfully good."

The snowpack figures represent an improvement from just weeks ago, when snow levels statewide were around 80 percent of average.

The surge is the result of regular pulses of winter weather, about one a week for the past five weeks.

"The last full week of March and into April, wow, this is what grandpa used to talk about, the big spring storm," Day said.

"Not every storm has hit all of the state, but the wealth has been distributed very well by Mother Nature," he added.

The result has been a turnaround in statewide drought conditions.

"What we're seeing is a definite improvement in the overall drought situation," Gray said.

Drought problems continue to linger in some areas, including the far southwestern part of the state, in southern Lincoln County and parts of Uinta County.

"Even there, we're starting to make some major progress on the dry conditions we've been seeing for much of the last seven to nine years," Gray said.

Wyoming's neighbors are also feeling the love from Mother Nature.

Northern Colorado, western Nebraska and southwestern South Dakota are all enjoying the spring moisture, Gray said.

"We're all doing fairly well at this moment in time, which is certainly an improvement over much of the last decade," he said.

The trade off, weather experts said, is the increased potential for flooding.

Forecasters are predicting temperatures in the mid-70s today and tomorrow with only slight relief at night.

"It's going to stay very warm ... through Thursday, so there will be continued snow melt," Day said.

In addition, another spring storm -- the sixth in six weeks -- is also headed toward the state. Rain east of the divide is expected Friday night and Saturday.

The combination of warm temperatures and rains could mean flooding in some high-risk areas, said Jim Fahey, a hydrologist with the National Weather Service in Riverton.

"It's all a timing issue," Fahey said.

The National Weather Service in Riverton on Tuesday warned of moderate to high flood potential in a number of drainages on the eastern slope of the Big Horns. The towns of Big Horn, Story, Buffalo, Kaycee and Sussex are at risk.

The flood risk is also high in the Upper North Platte basin, especially the towns of Encampment, Riverside and Saratoga, and on the Little Snake basin in southern Wyoming, from Savery to Baggs, according to the National Weather Service.

The agency warned of moderate flooding potential in the Laramie headwaters basin, including the town of Laramie; the lower Wind River basin, including the towns of Lander and Riverton; the north and south forks of the Shoshone River, including Buffalo Bill State Park; and the Upper portions of the Salt River.

The rain should change to snow by Sunday and Monday. Cooler temperatures are expected next week, which should temporarily slow the runoff, and the flooding, forecasters said.

On a more positive note, the high water is good news for the state's water storage system.

Reservoirs across Wyoming are fuller than normal for this time of year, said John Lawson U.S. Bureau of Reclamation area manager for Wyoming.

That's partly the result of a good snow season last year, which allowed additional carryover. Strong valley rains last year also helped conserve water that would have otherwise gone to irrigation.

This year's larger-than-normal snowpack could continue the trend, Lawson said.

"The outlook looks pretty good," he added.

-- Boysen Reservoir in central Wyoming is 80 percent full, or 114 percent of average for this time of year.

-- Buffalo Bill Reservoir near Cody is 67 percent full, or 108 percent of average for this time of year.

-- Seminoe Reservoir in southeastern Wyoming is 51 percent full, or 113 percent of average.

-- Pathfinder Reservoir near Casper is 38 percent full, or 61 percent of average.

Lawson said his agency will begin to move more water from Seminoe to Pathfinder in about a week to raise levels there.

The next several weeks will be critical for Wyoming's summer water supply -- and flood outlook.

Extended periods of unseasonable warm temperatures, or lots of rain, could destroy the mountain snowpack.

On the other hand, spring snow could continue to fall, and more flooding could be on the way, experts said.

"Things could get very warm, and we could lose some snow in the month of May," Gray said. "But May also tends to be one of the biggest snow times in much of the state."

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