

It's beginning to look a lot like ...

Snow forecast for Wyoming entering Christmas weekend

By KELSEY DAYTON Star-Tribune staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, December 20, 2011 6:00 am

LANDER -- Late fall in Wyoming has been marked by cold temperatures and high winds but little snow, begging the question: What happened to La Nina?

Early fall forecasts called for a second consecutive La Nina year, bringing above-average snow to the state. Yet snowpack has remained below average for about the past month.

That is expected to change soon.

A storm system is forecast to hit northern Wyoming on Wednesday morning -- the official start of winter -- and spread across the state through the afternoon and overnight, said Trevor LaVoie, a meteorologist intern with the National Weather Service in Riverton.

Casper could receive up to four inches of snow, with double that amount on Casper Mountain, LaVoie said. Sweetwater County could get up to six inches, he said.

Along with the snow, people can expect wind gusts entering the Christmas weekend.

"Travel is going to be pretty tricky from Wednesday, possibly into Friday morning," LaVoie said.

The snow that this storm brings will be here to stay for the winter, he said.

"Once the snow sets in, it's not going anywhere," LaVoie said.

This year is similar to last year's patterns, with snow near Thanksgiving, a quiet December, a storm near Christmas and then system after system in the winter months, LaVoie said. The difference this year has been the colder temperatures caused by a strong inversion that's trapped cold air in valleys since the beginning of December, he said.

The weather is indicative of a La Nina pattern despite the absence of snow, he said. Wyoming can still expect a wet winter, although nothing like last year. How much snow we'll see remains uncertain, he said.

Lee Hackleman, a water supply specialist with the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service, reported Monday that the state average for snowpack was 82 percent of normal. Last year at this time it was 110 percent, with a low of 79 percent and a high of 143 percent.

This year's low is 59 percent of average in the Upper Green River Basin and the high is 117 percent of average in the Powder-Tongue area.

While the numbers, which indicate moisture, are down from last year, it's still early in the season, Hackleman said.

The weather is similar throughout the Rocky Mountain region, said Kate Foster, communications manager for the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce.

Other ski towns are also dry right now, so the lack of snow hasn't had a big impact on tourism, she said.

"We are hoping for more snow, of course," she said.

Resort reservations were down 22 percent on Saturday, but were down only 3 percent for Wednesday, she said.

While skiing is a huge draw to Jackson, families do come to town to take advantage of other activities as well, she said.

"There's a lot of other things to think about other than just how awesome the snow is," Foster said. "Good snow helps, but we're doing fine."

Jackson Hole Mountain Resort opened almost all of its major lifts on opening day -- Thanksgiving weekend -- said Zahan Billimoria, communications manager.

The tram, which goes to the top of 10,450-foot Rendezvous Mountain, is the only lift not yet open. It is set to open Friday for sightseeing, but Billimoria wasn't sure when it would open for skiing. Normally, Rendezvous Bowl, which is accessed by the tram, would be open by this week, he said. Last year, for the first time, the tram opened on the resort's first day of the season, he said.

The resort, which has a base of 28 inches, received snow at the end of November but has had a dry December. However, the cold temperatures have kept all of the existing snow intact and allowed the resort to make snow. While early conditions exist, meaning skiers are advised to watch for exposed rocks or other obstacles, much of the mountain is open, Billimoria said.

Reports called for a dry early and end of season, with heavy snowfall in the middle, Billimoria said.

"I'm going with that," he said. "We'll take it."