

Snowpack fine, but much of Wyoming still dry

Lander heading toward 2nd-driest April on record

By The Associated Press

LANDER - The above-average mountain snowpack bodes well for Wyoming's reservoirs, rivers and streams, but many of the state's meadows and prairie lands east of the Continental Divide are dry and in danger of continued drought, a National Weather Service official said.

All major river basins across Wyoming have average to above-average water totals for October 2007 through March 2008, according to Jim Fahey, a water expert with the National Weather Service in Riverton.

But Lander is on pace for its second-driest April since scientists began recording here in 1919, Fahey said.

"For the most part, east of the divide, it's getting kind of dry for March and April in the basins and rangelands," he said.

Since April 1, Lander has received barely more than a tenth of an inch of precipitation, Fahey said.

"The next five weeks are crucial," he said. "But the Climate Prediction Center is predicting a 30 to 40 percent chance for below-normal precipitation May through July - right in the heart of the usual wet season."

One notable exception to the east-of-the-divide dry spell is the Rawlins area, Fahey said. It looks to have slightly above-average moisture and snowmelt this spring and early summer.

In the Lander region, cattle ranchers are expecting either a long-awaited reprieve from drought, or more of the same, depending upon where their summer ranges are.

Anjie McConnell, a Lander cattle rancher, runs cows in the South Pass area of the Wind River Range during the summer, which has been buried in deep snow for most of the winter. A relatively cool April has meant that much of that snow has remained unmelted, which should lead to more summertime forage for the cattle.

"I think it's doing as good as it's done in a lot of years," McConnell said.

But Tom Abernathy, a cattle rancher about 30 miles southeast of Lander, is looking at a different summer rangeland picture, one that has nothing to do with mountain snowpack.

Unless the prairie gets a good dose of moisture this spring, followed by another storm in the early summer, he might have to liquidate some of his livestock this year, Abernathy said.

"We did have adequate soil moisture, but the wind has blown out here for three weeks straight, and it's sucked up most of the moisture," Abernathy said.