

# Snowpack helps Wyo keep pulling out of drought



Dustin Collins of Jamestown, N.D., enjoys some fresh Wyoming powder while snowmobiling in the Gros Ventre Range near Bondurant this week. Snowpack in most of the state's mountains is near historical averages. (Mark Gocke, Star-Tribune correspondent)

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With most of Wyoming's mountain snowpack sitting pretty this winter at what are considered average levels, there's some promise that the state is continuing to make progress in its long, slow recovery from years of drought.

So far, so good, said Jim Fahey, hydrologist for the Wyoming office of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

But forecasters aren't ready to declare a full recovery yet. Much of the state's heaviest and most important precipitation for water supplies and rangelands typically doesn't arrive until spring.

So Wyoming isn't out of the woods. Reservoirs need replenishing, and the southwestern corner of the state is still experiencing some drought conditions.

"We're really close, I think," Fahey said. "I'm thinking southwest Wyoming is going to take a little bit. They've been in a moderate drought for a little while."

"The rest of the state's doing pretty well, but spring rains are going to be an important one to keep the momentum going in the right direction for keeping Wyoming drought free," he said.

Snow measurements that compare the water content in mountain snowpacks with historical averages show that only a handful of river basins in Wyoming are below what are considered normal levels.

The Lower Green and Upper Bear river basins continue to be the driest in Wyoming.

The biggest wild card for much of Wyoming's water supply and rangelands is the months of April, May and June.

"We need to have the spring rain. If we don't get the spring rain we might be back into the thick of it again," Fahey said. "We could do better, but we're not doing too bad. We've definitely seen worse."

Precipitation for the year on Wyoming's rangelands and pasturelands is hovering around average wintertime levels in the north and below average levels in the south. Pretty much all of the state's agricultural areas will need a good dose of spring rains to continue recovering from drought, Fahey said.

The majority of Wyoming's rangelands and pastures typically receive almost half of all of their rainfall for the entire year in April, May and June.

The snowpack that feeds the North Platte River and its vital storage basins of Seminoe and Pathfinder reservoirs

will also need a snowy, rainy spring to continue recovering from drought, said John Lawson, Wyoming area director for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. Winter snowfall alone probably isn't enough to replenish the Platte's storage basins.

At this time last year, the two reservoirs had plummeted to miserably low levels. Seminoe had dropped to 22 percent of its capacity, and Pathfinder sat at an abysmal 17 percent full. Then things turned around.

"What saved us last year is we got a huge amount of runoff and spring rain in April and May," Lawson said. "April and May makes us or breaks us."

This year, both reservoirs are in a little better shape, with Seminoe currently at 50 percent full and Pathfinder at 40 percent, but it's too early to make predictions about how much snowmelt there will be to refill them in the spring and summer, Lawson said.

"The crap shoot is this: What are we going to get in April and May in terms of snow? Are we going to have one of those wet springs that really pack in the snow up there? If we do, then we're going to do exceptionally well."

Overall, water levels in reservoirs across Wyoming are up 24 percent from a year ago. Boysen Reservoir, which stores water for the Wind River/Big Horn River system, is 81 percent full, the highest it's been during winter for years.

"Last year was a dramatic turnaround. That's the good news," Lawson said. "But I keep cautioning people, especially over the last seven or eight years, we could just turn around and fall right on our face again this year, and we would deplete a lot of that out of our system, because we're still a long way from a full recovery."

### **Wyoming snowpack**

These numbers show the percentages of water content in snowpack around Wyoming when compared with the historical average as of Wednesday.

Snake River Basin 93 percent

Upper Yellowstone/Madison 93 percent

Wind River Basin 79 percent

Big Horn Basin 102 percent

Shoshone River Basin 95 percent

Powder-Tongue Basin 117 percent

Belle Fourche Basin 124 percent

Upper N. Platte Basin 106 percent

Lower N Platte/Sweetwater 83 percent

Little Snake River Basin 111 percent

Upper Green River Basin 89 percent

Lower Green River Basin 73 percent

Upper Bear River Basin 90 percent

Source: National Resources Conservation Service