

Snowpack starts slowly

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CHEYENNE -- Snow accumulation in much of Wyoming's high country is below average for this time of year, the state climatologist said Tuesday.

But with several months of winter ahead, there's still time to replenish the mountain snowpack in advance of spring.

"If there is anything I can point to as good news, it's that there is a lot of winter left," Steve Gray said. "Many times we have seen the snow pick up as we go into the deep winter months."

Snowpack is strongest in the northwest corner of the state, where the levels are roughly aligned with historical averages for this time of year, and the snow has a fairly high moisture content.

Farther south, the lack of snow in the Wind River Mountains in central Wyoming is a "bit of a concern," Gray said.

Snowpack on both the eastern and western slopes of the range is around 55 to 65 percent of average for this time of year.

"We tend to get lots of snow coming through the beginning of February and March and often into April," Gray said. "So it's just something to keep an eye on right now."

The nearby Wyoming Range also lacks snow, and that has put a damper on snowmobiling.

Debbie Miller, a member of the Pinedale Snow Explorers snowmobile club, said people are getting out, but they aren't having as much fun as they would under better conditions.

The club didn't bother with its annual Thanksgiving-day ride because of the lack of snow.

"Conditions aren't great right now," Miller said.

Likewise, the extreme southwest and northeast corners of the state are dry.

The areas around Evanston and south of Rock Springs have seen little snow.

In the Black Hills, the snowpack is less than 50 percent of the historical average for this time of year, according to the state's lone measurement site in that area. Nearby stations in South Dakota are reporting roughly the same numbers, Gray said.

Snowpack in the Sierra Madre and Medicine Bow mountains in south-central Wyoming is running about 80 percent of the average. Those areas tend to receive lots of late-season snow.

"We can still really make up and have a nice snowpack there," Gray said.

Even if statewide snowpack improves, however, it won't be easy to quench years of continuous drought in parts of the state.

The situation is particularly dire for areas fed by the North Platte River, where reservoirs have repeatedly been tapped to compensate for the lack of snowmelt and precipitation.

"Even if you're getting 75 to 80 percent (of average snowpack), you're not making up any ground there, and in

many situations you're losing ground," Gray said.

What would be ideal, he added, is above-average snowfall in the mountains and a cool spring to prolong runoff into the dry summer months. "Not only for this year, but a couple of years in a row before we can breathe a sigh of relief around here," Gray said.

The National Weather Service isn't projecting any such bailout in its long-term forecast.

A La Nina weather pattern is developing over the Pacific Ocean -- a condition that normally means warmer-than-average temperatures for the West.

Still, there's no clear indicator of what might be in store for the state in terms of snowpack for the next several months.

"We're not exactly where we want to be at this point, but we've still got a lot of winter to make up ground here," Gray said.

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