

Snow piles up in Wyoming

By JARED MILLER

Star-Tribune capital bureau

Saturday, April 12, 2008 2:05 AM MDT

CHEYENNE -- Mountain snow levels in Wyoming are above average for this time of year, thanks in part to recent storms that deposited wet, heavy flakes across much of the state.

Experts say the abundance of high-country moisture this spring could result in a much-needed recharge for reservoirs and has sparked hope of a turnaround in the persistent drought.

“The numbers have made a big, big jump,” said Jim Fahey, hydrologist at the National Weather Service office in Riverton.

A storm Thursday in southeast and central Wyoming deposited up to 20 inches of snow in the Medicine Bow Range in Carbon County and 7 inches in the Centennial area.

That helped push the snow-water equivalent in the critical Upper North Platte drainage to more than 115 percent of average, and the Little Snake River drainage in Carbon and Sweetwater counties to nearly 130 percent of average.

The Upper Green River Basin, with a snowpack of 92 percent, is the only below-average region in the state.

In all, the statewide snow-water equivalent is around 25 percent higher than at this time last year, according to the National Weather Service.

“We're doing real well statewide,” Fahey said.

The heavy snowpack could help small- and medium-sized reservoirs including Jackson Lake in western Wyoming and Boysen Reservoir in central Wyoming return to near-normal levels, Fahey said.

Larger reservoirs, including Flaming Gorge and Fontenelle in southwest Wyoming, will need more time to recover from large deficits, Fahey said.

“They're going to take a couple of good runoff years to fill,” he added.

Skiers and snowboarders at Grand Targhee Resort in western Wyoming have been especially grateful for the long, white winter, spokesman Dave Hudacsko said.

One reason for the strong snowpack, Hudacsko said, is the considerable accumulation of powder and the lack of warm days.

“It's been fantastic,” Hudacsko said. “It feels like about the 110th day of January.”

Heavy snow has been less of a blessing in other parts of the state.

Carbon County commissioners on Tuesday asked Gov. Dave Freudenthal to declare a disaster area so ranchers there can apply for federal assistance.

One measurement site in that county, Battle Mountain, reported a snow-water equivalent of almost 190 percent

of average on Friday.

“It's a huge economic factor for producers, especially of sheep,” said Jerry Paxton, vice president of the Carbon County Commission.

Paxton said producers have been forced to spend more on feed and won't be able to graze their livestock as early as normal because of lingering snow and ice.

The hard winter also took a toll on the county's bottom line, as rescue workers and law enforcement helped those who fell victim to treacherous road conditions.

“It's been a long, hard winter, and I think everyone is ready for spring,” Paxton said.

State Rep. William “Jeb” Steward, R-Encampment, said the heavy snowfall made it feel like a “normal” winter after several below-average years.

“Some of the snow we got early has just stuck around, and we really haven't had many warm spells where it's opened up for us,” Steward said. “We've been covered up for a while now.”

The cold weather could be over soon.

Forecasters are predicting temperatures in the high 60s or low 70s on Monday and Tuesday in some low-lying areas.

The warm-up probably won't be enough to trigger any flooding, however, because mountain temperatures will remain relatively cool, Fahey said.

“There will be some melting in the mountains, especially in the late morning and afternoon, but we don't expect any stream or river rises that would be anywhere near bank-full,” said Roger Smith, NWS meteorologist in Riverton.

More seasonal temperatures should return by Wednesday or Thursday, thanks to a series of weather systems moving in from the West Coast, Smith said.

Over the long term, forecasters are predicting normal temperatures for most of the state, which is good for the mountain snowpack.

The exception could be southeast Wyoming, where the national Climate Prediction Center is forecasting slightly above-average temperatures for April, May and June.

If the weather remains seasonable, Fahey said, the runoff should be steady and the recharge to the land and reservoirs will be strong.

But if temperatures spike, it could mean a quick end to the snowfall and a continuation of the drought.

“If we get into the 80s, then we have some big problems,” Fahey said. “But as long as you don't have drastic increases in temperatures, we're not going to lose the upper-level snow, and it'll last through the summer.”

Reach capital bureau reporter Jared Miller at (307) 632-1244 or at {M3jared.miller@trib.com.