

Wet spring could ease western Wyoming's runoff concerns

## Snowy weather ends dry winter

By JEREMY PELZER - Star-Tribune capital bureau | Posted: Thursday, April 8, 2010



John Larralde catches some air off of a snowdrift in Beartrap Meadow on Casper Mountain Wednesday. Casper Mountain's snowpack as of Wednesday morning had risen to 115 percent of average for this point in the year, as a result of recent snowfall. (Tim Kupsick/Star-Tribune)

CHEYENNE -- Until about couple of weeks ago, it hadn't been a very snowy winter at the Grand Targhee Ski Resort in extreme western Wyoming.

Snowfall at the resort was about 65-70 percent of the seasonal average, said Shannon Brooks Hamby, the resort's communications director.

But during the past eight days, a series of winter storms has blanketed the resort with 77 inches of snow, leading the resort to extend its season by a week to April 18.

"We've really caught up with the other six feet of snow that's fallen just in the past eight days," Hamby said. "March and April can be some of our snowiest months, but to see it come in such a rush at the very end of the season is pretty unusual."

Despite the recent wintry weather throughout Wyoming, snowpack in the western part of the state is still well below historical averages. As of Wednesday, the Snake River, Shoshone River, Upper Yellowstone

River and Upper Green River basins all had snowpacks only about 60 to 65 percent of average, according to data from the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

That hasn't been the case, though, in the North Platte Basin, where the recent storms lifted snowpack levels at both the upper and lower parts of the basin to slightly above-average levels.

And more snow could be on the way during the next few weeks, weather forecasters predict.

This winter, an El Nino weather pattern across the Pacific Ocean has led to reduced snowfall in the Northern Rockies and more snow for the southwestern United States, said Don Day of Cheyenne-based DayWeather.

But during a strong El Nino pattern -- like the one this year -- the jet stream often moves north as spring arrives, Day said, bringing the wet weather with it.

"I'm optimistic that while we're not going to get snowpacks to normal in western drainages, we're going to continue to make progress in snowpacks," he said. "It's like being down by 50 points at halftime: You make a comeback, you make the score look a lot better at the end, but you still lose."

The recent buildup of snowpack has led the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Wyoming area office to improve its spring runoff predictions for many Wyoming reservoirs.

On the North Platte River, about 650,000 acre feet of water is expected to enter Seminoe Reservoir between April and July, according to the Reclamation office. That's 92 percent of average, said Reclamation area manager John Lawson, but it's up from the 84 percent of average predicted at the beginning of March.

Lawson said runoff into the North Platte from between Pathfinder and Glendo Reservoir is expected to be 96 percent of average -- up from the 72 percent predicted last month.

Snowpack measurements around the Buffalo Bill Reservoir, near Cody, are now at 64 percent of average, Lawson said, up from 55 percent of normal on March 29.

"That's a pretty good improvement in a very short period of time -- 55 to 64," he said. "But it's still pretty dismal, isn't it?"

But the weather this winter hasn't been all bad, at least for Garrett Henry, who runs 88 Ranch Outfitters north of Douglas.

Henry said he hasn't seen as many dead mule deer and antelope this winter, thanks to the mild weather.

"It just means that the trophy-sized game are going to be alive this fall," he said.

The rash of storms lately is a good thing, too, Henry said.

"I think that these smaller storms like this will be excellent as far as just trying to get some grass to grow," he said. "It's been so dry that we need some grass for the horn growth."

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By the numbers

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

Snake River Basin 62 percent

Upper Yellowstone/Madison 64 percent

Wind River Basin 92 percent

Big Horn Basin 74 percent

Shoshone River Basin 65 percent

Powder-Tongue Basin 89 percent

Belle Fourche Basin 90 percent

Upper N. Platte Basin 105 percent

Lower N. Platte 104 percent

Little Snake River Basin 108 percent

Upper Green River Basin 60 percent

Lower Green River Basin 80 percent

Upper Bear River Basin 69 percent

Source: National Resources Conservation Service