

Wet year could prompt more early releases from reservoirs

By JOSHUA WOLFSON Star-Tribune staff writer trib.com | Posted: Tuesday, January 3, 2012



TIM KUPSICK | Star-Tribune file

Dino Wenino rides through the small canal that was created between two barriers in front of the Tate Pumphouse on May 25 in Casper. The barriers were used to keep the North Platte River from coming closer to the building. Early releases of water from the reservoirs along the river helped keep flooding problems in Casper to a minimum last summer.

Federal water managers should guard against flooding by releasing water early from the North Platte River reservoir system, according to a recommendation from the man who managed the system for 22 years.

The system is storing 38 percent more water than normal, thanks to last year's record-breaking snowpack. In order to create storage space, officials should begin sending water downstream about two months ahead of schedule, said former Bureau of Reclamation Wyoming Area Manager John Lawson.

"I believe with the reservoir system being this full still, and with the unknowns ... they should start releasing water in late February or early March," Lawson said.

Lawson retired Dec. 31. Bureau officials have not yet selected his successor.

The bureau also conducted early releases last year. Lawson credited them with helping to minimize flooding caused by runoff from the heavy snowpack.

Nearly 2 million acre feet of water flowed into Seminoe Reservoir, the first reservoir in the system, between April and July. That's more than any other year on record.

In Casper, the North Platte reached a volume of 8,200 cubic feet per second in mid-June - about four times normal for that time of year. The high water submerged parts of the Platte River Parkway and forced workers to pile sandbags to protect the Tate Pumphouse and the Mills Water Treatment Plant.

Still, early releases allowed water managers to keep river flows below the levels experienced in 1983 and 1984, the last time the North Platte flooded through Casper. Some homes experienced basements flooding last summer, but that was due to the rising water table, rather than the river spilling its banks.

"People were very concerned that we were overreacting and releasing water that we should be hanging onto in our reservoir system," Lawson said. "It proved out to be very wise."

Balancing needs

Early reservoir releases are not without risk. Farmers in eastern Wyoming and Nebraska depend on North Platte water for irrigation. If the bureau releases too much this spring, there might not be enough for crops if the region suffers two or more dry years.

Central Wyoming experienced a drought as recently as the middle part of last decade. The system was so dry that Lawson thought Pathfinder Reservoir, which holds up to 1 million acre feet of water, might be completely emptied.

So far this winter, the snowpack in the Upper North Platte basin has been below average. But Lawson said he's still recommending early releases.

"But be very cautious about that action as far as watching the snowpack," he said. "And if it doesn't develop in April, you start cutting back the releases and not continue to increase them like we did last year."

If late-season storms drop a lot of snow in the region, water managers can up the releases, he added.

December's below-average snowpack numbers don't necessarily mean the North Platte Basin is headed for a dry spring. The runoff outlook can change quickly in April and May, when heavy, wet snows are more likely.

"Usually, you don't put a lot of credibility on information in December," Lawson said.

Lawson didn't wait for his successor to begin clearing space in the system's seven reservoirs. Over the summer, the system was storing close to 3 million acre feet of water - enough to fill Alcova Reservoir 16 times.

The bureau forced enough water through the system so that by Sept. 30, it was storing slightly more than 2 million acre feet of water.

"We were pushing water all the way, right up to the last hour, trying to get the system down," he said.