Wyoming's snowpack rises above average

By The Associated Press

CHEYENNE - The chilly spring storms that dumped heavy snowfall across Wyoming over the past two weeks have pushed the state's snowpack above average, but it remains to be seen just how much reservoirs will benefit during the thirsty summer, officials said Monday.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service reported that the amount of water stored in Wyoming snowpack was at 104 percent of the 30-year average as of Monday. The state was at 102 percent of average at this point last year.

A series of storms caused all of the state's 13 basins to gain snowpack over the past two weeks. The statewide snowpack improved 17 percent during that time.

Watch and wait

"It's productive to this point, but it's too early to say what the final outcome is going to be," said John Lawson, Bureau of Reclamation manager for Wyoming. "The next 30 to 45 days is going to be what's very important, because that's when we really start either getting our heavy snows or it starts going south on us."

Lawson's office manages most of the reservoirs in Wyoming, primarily for the benefit of irrigators. Reservoirs in Wyoming receive from 70 to 80 percent of their annual inflow during April through July, Lawson said.

Lawson said the reservoir system is recovering from drought that dried Wyoming from 2001 to 2007, but last year's average snowpack helped replenish water levels.

The reservoirs are "at a point where we can meet people's needs this year," Lawson said. "Even if we meet people's needs this year, and we don't get a good inflow, that just means we're going to have to start really tightening our belts in future years."

As of Monday, the reservoir system on the North Platte - including Seminoe, Pathfinder, Kortes, Alcova, Glendo and Guernsey - was at 52 percent of capacity. That represented 87 percent of the system's 30-year average, Lawson said.

Encouraging news

"We're in the process of recovering from the drought period that started in 2001 on the North Platte," he said. "But it's awful encouraging."

Boysen Reservoir on the Wind River was 80 percent full and 111 percent of its 30-year average for this point of the year, Lawson said. However, the bureau has projected that Boysen will receive only 88 percent of its average inflow through July.

In northwest Wyoming, Buffalo Bill Reservoir was 67 percent full Monday and at 106 percent of its 30-year average for this time of year, Lawson said.

"Our operations studies show that we will fill Buffalo Bill Reservoir," Lawson said. "We'll meet all our demands and we'll probably be passing additional water, just because we're probably going to have that much inflow. We had the same situation last year at Buffalo Bill."

For the near term, it appears that Wyoming can count on at least a couple more storms crossing the state, said Jack Daseler, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Cheyenne.

"We're kind of in a pattern here, where we're getting these storms every three or four days or so, and it looks like that will continue to the middle of next week," he said. "At this time of year, most of the systems coming in from the Pacific Coast are wet. They're definitely able to hold onto their moisture as they move into the Rockies."

The spring snowstorms have been a mixed bag for ranchers, said Judy McCullough, who raises cattle in Moorcroft in northeast Wyoming. The weekend storm killed two of the four calves that were born on her ranch during the storm, she said. Her ranch benefits more from rain that falls later in April when temperatures are higher.

"Right here, in the sagebrush flat country I'm from, these kinds of storms are just kind of costly. Yeah, they'll provide moisture, but you pay for it in loss of calves during calving," McCullough said. "But I know that people who rely on irrigation need that snow in the mountains, and they should've got some."