

Snowpack

Still time for storms as snow starts to melt

Oregon

February's warm weather reduced the snowpack in Oregon's mountains, but for now the water supply is projected to be near normal or more this summer, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service said in its monthly bulletin.

As of March 1, the snowpack statewide was 90 percent of normal, NRCS analysts reported. While warmer than usual weather is predicted for the next three months, intermittent storms can bring more snow to the mountains and replenish the snowpack, the NRCS said.

"Snowpacks are dense and consolidated throughout the state, meaning they are at the tipping point between remaining frozen and melting," the agency said. Keeping higher temperatures and mountain rainfall at bay for the next few weeks could preserve the snowpack, NRCS said.

"March and April weather will ultimately shape the peak of the snowpack season and set the stage for the summer water supply season," NRCS said.

The Harney and John Day basins in southeast Oregon had the highest March 1 snowpacks, according to the bulletin. They were measured at 107 percent and 106 percent of normal, respectively.

The Willamette River Basin, home to many of the state's agricultural operations, had the lowest snowpack at 82 percent of normal. The Hood, Sandy and Lower Deschutes basins stood at 84 percent of normal.

The figures are low even though the basins have had heavy precipitation all winter. But much of it fell as rain rather than snow, illustrating the "influence of temperature on snowpack," the NRCS concluded.

California

The California snowpack's dip below normal levels could be short-lived if an anticipated



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

NRCS hydrologist Julie Koeberle takes a snow depth and water content reading near Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood in late December. After a great start with heavy snow, the snowpack declined a bit in February, but the summer water outlook is still OK.

March pattern of cold and wet storms continues through the month.

The unusually warm afternoons in February that hastened the almond blossom and development of other tree crops left a statewide snow water content that was 80 percent of normal as of March 3, according to the state Department of Water Resources.

"Our snowpack, snowfall and precipitation were quite a bit below average for the month of February," DWR snow surveys chief Frank Gehrke told reporters after his third manual survey of the season March 1 at Phillips Station, about 90 miles east of Sacramento.

"Quite remarkably, very clear, sunny weather has contributed to a premature melt of the snowpack," he said. "Now obviously we're better than last year, but we're still way below what would be considered adequate for any reasonable level of recovery at this point."

Fortunately, with a new month came a major change in the weather pattern for Northern and Central California, as



Courtesy of Calif. Dept. of Water Resources

Frank Gehrke, right, the California Department of Water Resources snow surveys chief, checks snow levels with the help of Rachel Ehlers, left, and Brian Brown of the Legislative Analyst's Office. The survey was March 1 in the mountains east of Sacramento.

the National Weather Service's longer-range outlooks show that periodic storms are likely through at least mid-March.

Some of these storms could bring lower snow levels, which would bode well for replenishing snow that has melted.

California's major reservoirs could still use the boost. Shasta Lake, the centerpiece of

the federal Central Valley Project, was at 61 percent of capacity and 83 percent of normal as of March 3, while the State Water Project's Lake Oroville was at 53 percent and 76 percent, respectively, according to the DWR.

Washington

The forecast calls for a full water supply for irrigators in the Yakima Basin, but experts say that prediction could change as warm weather melts the snowpack in the Cascade Mountains about a month earlier than desired.

A lack of significant snowfall in February is another contributing factor, they said. The chances of significant new snowstorms are also slim.

If that scenario continues to play out, some irrigators in the Yakima Basin could have less than normal water supply in August.

Statewide snowpack was 100 percent of normal on March 1, down from 109 percent on Feb. 1 and 120 percent on Jan. 1, said Scott Pattee, water supply specialist at the Washington Snow Survey Office of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Mount Vernon.

While the snowpack is good, its water content is 10 percent greater than normal for this time of year, Pattee said. That's from more rain than snow and will hasten runoff, he said. Temperatures have been 5 to 15 degrees above normal for the last month or two, he said.

"If we continue these warm temperatures, (mid and higher-level) snowpack will ripen and start melting sooner and faster than normal and than we want it to," he said.

Snowpack below 3,000 feet already has melted and everything below 4,000 feet likely will be gone by April 1, he said. Peak snowpack is usually about April 1 but this year it is probably about now, he said.

There were a couple 4- to 5-inch snowfalls in the Cascades in February, but that's not much and chances of any more large snowfalls are not good, he said.

Irrigators in the farm-rich

Yakima and Kittitas valleys usually depend on snowpack runoff for April. As of March 1, the Spokane Basin snowpack was 88 percent of normal. The upper Columbia (Okanogan and Methow rivers) was 122 percent. The central Columbia (Chelan, Entiat and Wenatchee) was 118 percent, the upper Yakima was 95 and the lower Yakima was 102. The lower Snake was 98 percent of normal and the lower Columbia was 94 percent.

South Puget Sound (from Cascade crest to lowlands) snowpack was 95 percent, central Puget Sound was 88, north Puget Sound 100 and the Olympic snowpack was 103.

The lowest reading was the Skykomish Basin at 62 percent and the highest was the Methow at 135.

Idaho

A warm, dry February has Idaho mountain snowpacks prematurely poised to melt, the state's water experts say.

Ron Abramovich, Idaho water supply specialist with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, said Idaho's snowpack has "ripened" about a month ahead of normal, due to above-normal February temperatures.

Total snow-moisture content wasn't affected much at higher elevations, but the snowpack has become more compact, requiring less energy to melt, Abramovich said. He said snowpack densities ended February at 36 to 38 percent moisture, compared with a normal content of 30 to 34 percent for the start of March. Snow starts to melt when the density reaches 40 to 45 percent.

Abramovich said low-elevation and valley snow has melted, saturating soils, which should result in more runoff from the remaining snowpack entering streams and reservoirs.



Oregon Aglink

Take a new look at an old friend.



Pamela Lucht
Oregon Aglink Board Member

Pamela, along with her husband Neal and now their daughter Lauren, own Northwest Transplants, a 28-year-old business located in Molalla, Oregon. NWT is a transplant seedling nursery growing crops of all kinds on contract for their commercial farm customers. Their family operation now produces over 80 million seedlings and services five

Northwestern States and Western Canada.

Pamela, once a city girl, and a transplant to agriculture herself, believes the Oregon Ag Link team is doing good things for Agricultural Education. She and her family are passionate about Ag Education at all levels, including AgLink Adopt a Farmer Program. "I am proud that our company jumped at the opportunity to be one of the adopted farms. It's fun and exciting to watch students from all backgrounds make a connection with our small piece of agriculture." She believes exposing students to hands-on experiences about where their food comes from is one of our best ways to develop agricultural literacy.

As an Oregon Aglink board member, Pamela believes in Oregon Aglink's message that agriculture is rooted, green and vital. It's important to Pamela that Oregonians understand the critical role that agriculture plays in our economy. Aglink's Adopt a Farmer program, the Road Crop Identification Signs and the "I am Oregon Agriculture" TV ads are ways that Aglink is making this difference.

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