

# Water

## Drought officially vanishes from Washington landscape

### Evergreen State justifies nickname

By **DON JENKINS**  
Capital Press

After a winter that defied expectations, Washington on March 31 became the only one among 11 Western states completely free of drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

Climatologists predicted El Nino would cause a warm and dry winter in the Pacific Northwest, making likely a second-straight "snowpack



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

The Yakima River flows past Yakima, Wash. in this file photo. Meteorologists say no part of Washington state is in drought for the first time in years.

drought." Officials foresaw the water shortage that affected farmers throughout the state last summer deepening.

While temperatures statewide were warmer than nor-

mal, reservoirs and mountain snowpacks are generally above average. Long-term moisture deficits, particularly deep in southeast Washington, have been made up.

In a summary of crop conditions nationwide, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported March 29 that some Washington farmers were delaying tilling, spraying and fertilizing because of overly saturated soils. "Few fields were dry enough to start field work at the end of March," according to the USDA.

Washington State Assistant Climatologist Karin Bumbaco said Washington's winter has given something researchers to study.

"The scientific community is looking into it," she said. "The forecasts were wrong in

terms of precipitation, and we're grateful for that."

Washington was last drought-free on Dec. 31, 2013. Even then, 82 percent of the state was "abnormally dry," according to the drought monitor, a weekly report by the National Drought Mitigation Center in Lincoln, Neb.

Now, only 7 percent of the state, a band along the Oregon border that stretches across eight Eastern Washington counties, is "abnormally wet."

"I expect that to go away," said Bumbaco, a contributor to the drought monitor.

Washington's 2015 drought was caused by a low snowpack followed by the hottest summer on record. By July 7, the entire state was in a drought.

The drought peaked in late August, with 85 percent of Washington in "extreme drought." Two-thirds of the state was still in extreme drought at the start of the water year, Oct. 1.

As late as Nov. 10, the entire state was in at least a "moderate drought."

Idaho and Oregon also have shown significant improvements since Oct. 1.

### Oregon's improved water outlook holding steady

By **ERIC MORTENSON**  
Capital Press

Oregon's snowpack and summer water supply outlook remain much improved over last year, according to the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service in Portland.

Snow survey supervisor Scott Oviatt said a couple of hot days — temperatures on April 6 and 7 were forecast to reach the low 80s — shouldn't pose too much of a problem. A lengthy stretch of warm days, however, would be a different matter.

As of April 6, every river basin in the state was above average for precipitation, with measurements running 106 percent to 128 percent of normal for this time of year.

The amount of water contained in the snow hasn't quite kept pace, with snow water equivalents ranging from 74 percent to 107 percent of normal.

### Weather uncertainty dictates continued need to conserve water, Calif. officials say

By **TIM HEARDEN**  
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — California's near-normal snowpack this year could be the best the state sees for awhile, meteorologists say.

One of the strongest El Ninos on record is weakening quickly and could shift to a La Nina by next winter, bringing more uncertainty to much of California in terms of snowpack and rainfall.

Such a shift "is actually fairly common," said Michelle Mead, a National Weather Service warning coordinator in Sacramento, noting that La Nina patterns typically favor above-average precipitation in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California.

"But just because it's typical doesn't mean it's a slam dunk, just like for El Nino," Mead said.

The federal Climate Prediction Center puts the chances of a shift to a La Nina by next fall at 50 percent, but "considerable uncertainty remains," the agency noted in a report. While a La Nina could help Northern California's key reservoirs, much of the



Courtesy of Calif. Dept. of Water Resources

California Council on Science and Technology Fellows Dan Brumbaugh, John Thompson and Sarah Carville join Frank Gehrke, state Department of Water Resources snow surveys chief, at the fourth manual snow survey March 30 at a mountain station about 90 miles east of Sacramento.

rest of the state could remain dry.

With more uncertainty looming, state officials are urging Californians to enjoy the snow-capped mountains and full reservoirs they're seeing this spring but continue to conserve water for an ongoing drought.

In his fourth manual snow survey of the season March 30, state Department of Water Resources snow surveys chief Frank Gehrke found the snow water content at Phillips Station, about 90 miles east of Sacramento, to be 97 percent of normal for the date. Statewide, the

snowpack in the Sierra Nevada is 87 percent of average.

As April 1 is considered to be the peak for snowpack before higher spring temperatures cause the snow to melt, conditions now are about as good as they'll get this year, officials cautioned.

"This was a dry, dusty field last year, so it's a big improvement from last year," Gehrke told reporters at Phillips Station after conducting his survey, the results of which were consistent with other manual snow survey sites around the state.

### Owyhee district starts water

By **SEAN ELLIS**  
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — Water has started flowing into the Owyhee Irrigation District's 400 miles of canals, laterals and ditches a week earlier than planned.

OID board members decided to start the system on April 4 rather than April 11 in part because persistent high winds have dried soils and a lot of farmers have already planted, said district manager Jay Chamberlin.

"We figured if we waited until the 11th, we would be behind the eight ball," he said.

OID provides irrigation water for 1,800 farms and 118,000 acres in Eastern Oregon and part of southwestern Idaho.

OID board member and farmer Frank Ausman said there are spots on the system near Adrian with lighter soils that dry out quicker than other soil in the area.

"Those guys have a lot planted and they're needing a drink," he said.

That area near Adrian didn't receive some of the rainstorms other areas did, said farmer and OID board member Bruce Corn.

Temperatures are also start-

ing to reach into the 70s.

"It will take seven to 10 days for the water to get clear to the end of the system," Corn said. "I think everybody will be ready for it by the time it comes."

The board set the 2016 allotment for OID patrons at an initial 3 acre-feet but it's expected to increase as the Owyhee Reservoir continues to fill.

The board opted not to increase the allotment during its March 30 meeting, Chamberlin said, in part because reservoir in-flow levels decreased a little bit recently as cooler temperatures slowed the pace of snow melt.

Corn said board members are conservative on where they set the allotment.

"It's easy to raise it but if we over-allocate and then have to lower it, that would be difficult on people who have already made plans," he said.

Corn anticipates the allotment will be increased April 19 during the board's regular monthly meeting but he said it's too soon to say whether patrons will receive their full 4 acre-foot allotment.

"I think everybody knows the allotment will be increased some amount. How much still remains to be seen," he said.

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