

Water



U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

Lake Powell has dropped to critically low levels.

As drought lingers, Lake Powell about to drop below critical level

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN
Capital Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Due to an abnormally dry winter, Lake Powell on the Colorado River is on the brink of seeing its water levels temporarily drop below a critical threshold, threatening water supplies and hydropower in the region.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation announced that water levels at Lake Powell will likely fall 2 to 3 feet beneath the critical target level of 3,525 feet in elevation this month due to “a very dry January and February” that eroded the Colorado River Basin’s snowpack.

Last week, Lake Powell’s water level had already fallen to 3,526 feet in pool elevation, just 24% of capacity and nearly at the critical level.

The agency predicts water levels in the lake will recover temporarily later this spring — most likely in May — as the runoff season progresses, but the year’s overall outlook remains grim.

“This year, the Colorado River Basin has experienced extremely variable conditions with a record high snowpack one month, followed by weeks without snow,” said Reclamation Acting Commissioner David

Palumbo. “This variable hydrology and a warmer, drier West have drastically impacted our operations, and we are faced with the urgent need to manage in the moment.”

Lake Powell and nearby Lake Mead, the nation’s largest reservoir, have been draining at alarming rates over the past year.

These two reservoirs, fed by the Colorado River watershed, are part of a river system that supplies water to more than 40 million people across seven Western states and Mexico. Both reservoirs provide drinking and irrigation water across the vast region, including to many farms.

Last year, Arizona Farm Bureau President Stefanie Smallhouse expressed her concern that the impending water shortage in Lake Mead would mean some Central Arizona farmers in 2022 would “lose access to nearly half of the water on which they now rely to grow food and fiber for Arizona’s families.”

That prediction is close to becoming reality, and Powell is now following Mead on the trajectory to a serious water shortage.

Lake Powell’s plunging water level also threatens the Glen Canyon Dam’s ability

to produce hydropower.

Water managers have been working to prevent worst-case scenarios from materializing.

According to a statement from Reclamation, the agency, along with the Upper Division States and the Upper Colorado River Commission, have taken “proactive” measures to protect Lake Powell’s target elevation — first, by sending an additional 161,000 acre-feet of water from Blue Mesa and Flaming Gorge reservoirs to Lake Powell in 2021, and second, by temporarily reducing monthly releases from Glen Canyon Reservoir to keep enough water in the lake.

For now, however, plans are at a standstill.

“Reclamation is not planning to take further action to address this temporary dip below 3,525 feet because the spring runoff will resolve the deficit in the short term,” Reclamation Upper Colorado Basin Regional Director Wayne Pullan said in a statement.

However, Pullan said Lake Powell is projected to drop below the critical elevation 3,525 feet again later this year. If that happens, Pullan said Reclamation will be poised to take “additional actions” as needed.

NRCS: March key to ensuring Idaho irrigators have sufficient water

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Idaho’s snowpack is pegged at 80-100% of normal in most of the state, USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service said in a March 1 report.

But to maintain that level, at least normal storm activity is needed through March, NRCS said.

Above-normal rain and snow would be better everywhere and would especially benefit the Boise, Upper Snake and Southern Snake river basins.

Big Wood and Big Lost basins in the central mountains have good snowpack after two straight abnormally dry years. They need a wet spring to ensure adequate irrigation supplies due to low reservoir levels.

Hydrologists are encouraged by the recent arrival of more active weather, in contrast to the high pressure that kept conditions dry during much of January and February. They will watch how long this lasts and how far it extends into the southern region, where irrigated agriculture dominates.

NRCS said April and May rainfall and temperature patterns will strongly influ-

ence runoff efficiency.

Normal seasonal peak snowpack is still within reach for Little Wood, Lost, Salmon and Clearwater river basins as well as the state’s northern panhandle, said Daniel Tappa, hydrologist and data collection officer for the NRCS Snow Survey in Idaho.

“However, the ship has likely sailed on normal peak snowpack for our lower-elevation, southernmost basins, since these areas typically see peak snowpack in early March,” he said. Owyhee and Bruneau are examples.

NRCS said streamflow forecasts uniformly decreased since the Feb. 1 report. They call for below-normal flows for the Upper Snake, Southern Snake, Big Wood, Boise, Payette and Weiser basins.

Tappa said snow telemetry sites did not show widespread melting through February and into early March.

But runoff timing is hard to predict because most of the measurement sites are in protected terrain like heavily forested areas or have a northerly aspect, he said. There is much less data for south- and west-facing areas where snow may melt earlier.

Drought impacts stretch beyond West

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Last year’s Western and Northern Plains drought impacted agricultural markets beyond regional borders, a Farm Bureau economist says.

Danny Munch, American Farm Bureau Federation associate economist, said the area is critical because it is responsible for more than one-third of the nation’s agricultural production value. It produces more than a quarter of the total U.S. value of cattle, 40% of dairy value and 70% of vegetable, fruit and nut value.

“Any persistent drought conditions eat away at your ability to meet that production value,” he said.

For example, in the West-dominated vegetable, fruit and nut category, drought reduces domestic access, Munch said. Buyers thus must

rely on non-U.S. suppliers more, and in turn likely pay more.

The 11 Western states, plus the Dakotas and Minnesota, produce more than 57% of U.S. hay.

“So any reduction in the ability to produce hay makes it difficult for cattle and dairy producers across the country,” Munch said.

The region’s hay production value is big enough that any supply drop would lead to higher prices across the U.S., he said.

Demand likely will stay strong as drought — which reduced the supply of public lands forage as well as hay — is starting to expand into Texas, Nebraska and the Central Plains region.

Munch said the recent drought was notable in that it reached areas accustomed to having reliable water sources,

including parts of Washington, Oregon and northern Idaho.

Farm Bureau last fall asked producers in the 14 states about drought-related concerns they rated prevalent or higher. Among the 784 respondents, 87% cited feed costs, 79% identified removing animals from rangeland, 74% cited reduced surface water deliveries and 72% said they had a prevalent or higher concern about lower yields.

Other issues identified as generating prevalent or higher concern included increased travel distance to feed and forage sources, cited by 71% of responses; having to sell part of a herd or flock, 66%; increased groundwater usage, 65%; needing to haul water to livestock, 64%; increased local restrictions on water use, 50%; and the need to drill new wells, 47%.

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