

Drought shouldn’t impact hydro dams too much this summer

COEUR D’ALENE, Idaho (AP) — Despite one of the worst drought years on record, hydroelectric dams in the Pacific Northwest should not see their operations disrupted too much this summer, a regional power planning group was told Wednesday.

Water through the dams in the Columbia River Basin this summer is projected to be only about 71 percent of average, triggering dry year operation protocols for the dams, the Northwest Power and Conservation Council said.

The council, which includes members from Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana, was told by federal water managers that reservoirs would likely be lowered more than usual as the summer wears on.

But the council was also told by wildlife managers the drought is not expected to cause major problems for threatened and endangered salmon and steelhead runs this year.

“I will not kid you, it’s still going to be dry,” said Steve Barton of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Barton also said he did not expect any new navigation hazards to emerge in the rivers because of the drought.

“What you are describing is a pretty resilient system,” said Phil Rockefeller who is chair of the council.

Giant hydro dams on the Columbia and Snake river systems provide much of the electricity for the Pacific Northwest. The dams also provide flood control, irrigation for crops, navigation of cargo, and the water needed for fish to migrate to the sea and then back home to spawn. This year, a light

winter snowpack has raised concerns about how a water shortage would impact those activities.

The council, appointed by the governors of the four states, plans for future power needs while balancing the needs of fish and the environment of the Columbia River Basin.

The governors of Washington, Oregon and Idaho have declared drought emergencies in at least some portions of their states. No drought declarations have been issued in Montana.

The biggest impacts will likely come later this summer, when reservoirs behind some of the giant dams are drawn down much lower than normal, federal water managers told the council.

Meanwhile, salmon managers are seeking to balance when water is released into the river system to provide the best habitat for migrating fish.

“The salmon managers’ desire has been to move as much water as possible into the spring migration, with the understanding that this will likely have implications for summer flows later,” council staff said in a report to the council.

Ritchie Graves of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said this year ranks among the five worst drought years in more than half a century on the Columbia and Snake river systems.

Graves said 2001 was a similar low-flow year, when migrating salmon had to be collected and barged through the dams and there was a relatively low survival rate. It remains to be seen how many migrating fish will survive this year, he said.

U.S. orders more troops to Iraq

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama ordered the deployment of up to 450 more American troops to Iraq on Wednesday in an effort to reverse major battlefield losses to the Islamic State, an escalation but not a significant shift in the struggling U.S. strategy to defeat the extremist group.

The U.S. forces will open a fifth training site in the country, this one dedicated specifically to helping the Iraqi Army integrate Sunni tribes into the fight, an element seen as a crucial to driving the Islamic State out of the Sunni-majority areas of western Iraq.

The immediate objective is to win back the key city of Ramadi, which was seized by extremists last month.

The U.S. is insistent that Americans will not have a combat role. But in the deployment of American forces and the equipping of Iraqi troops, the U.S. must make sure “that we can be nimble because clearly this is a very nimble enemy,” Deputy National Security Adviser Benjamin Rhodes told reporters.

The plan is not a change in the U.S. strategy, the administration says, but addresses a need to get Sunnis more involved in the fight. Some local citizens in Sunni-majority areas fear an invasion and reprisals from Iran-backed Shiite militia even more than domination by the Islamic State, underscoring a need for any military campaign there to be led by local fighters.

But the Shiite-led Iraqi government’s record in recruiting Sunni tribesmen has been mixed at best, slowing efforts to regain Ramadi and Fallujah, a nearby city that Islamic State militants have held for more than a year.

Iraqi leaders fear that Sunni fighters, once armed, could turn against the government, and they have deployed most U.S.-trained Iraqi troops in defensive formations around Baghdad, the capital.

Obama this week lamented that the U.S. lacks a “complete strategy” for defeating the Islamic State, and officials pointed to a glaring lack of recruits among Sunnis. Wednesday’s announcement of a new training site at al-Taqaddum, a desert air base that was a U.S. military hub during the 2003-2011 war, is designed to fix that. The additional troops will include advisers, trainers, logisticians and security



AP Photo/Karim Kadim

Civilians inspect the site of a car bomb near restaurants and shop in Palestine Street in eastern Baghdad, Iraq, Wednesday.

personnel.

But the changes don’t go nearly far enough for critics of the administration’s approach. They have pressed for military coordinators and advisers closer to the front lines to augment the U.S. airstrike campaign.

House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, said Wednesday that sending several hundred military advisers to Iraq “is a step in the right direction,” but he criticized Obama for not having “an overarching strategy.” Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the Republican chairman of the Armed Services Committee, was harsher in his assessment: “This is incremental-ism at its best or worst, depending on how you describe it.”

Wednesday’s careful escalation illustrated Obama’s reluctance to plunge the U.S. too deeply into the fighting and his opposition to reintroducing U.S. soldiers into a war he had vowed to bring to an end.

Still, even some Democrats were concerned with the steps announced.

“Absent significant reform, we can help the Iraqi forces win battles, but they will not stay won,” said Rep. Adam Schiff of California, the House Intelligence Committee’s top Democrat. He took issue with Obama expanding the U.S. role in Iraq while the war still lacks congressional authorization, and he said it was up to Abadi’s government to give Sunnis a greater voice in the running of their country.

There now are nearly 3,100 U.S. troops in Iraq involved in training, advising, security and other support. In addition to bombing missions, the U.S. is conducting aerial reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering missions against Islamic State forces, while counting on Iraqi troops to do the fighting on the ground. Counterterrorism efforts in Syria, where the Islamic State has a greater foothold, are much less far along.

In Syria, an American fighting with Kurdish forces against the Islamic State group was killed in battle, authorities said Wednesday. With no connection to the U.S. military, he was probably the first American to die fighting alongside the Kurds against the extremists.

The fight against the Islamic State group has attracted dozens of Westerners, including a number of Iraq war veterans who have made their way back to the Middle East to join Kurdish fighters, who have had the most success.

As for the fresh U.S. military troops, Obama’s decision amounts to an acknowledgment by the administration that it has not been swift enough to respond to Iraqi military limitations and Islamic State inroads.

“We have seen shortfalls in elements of Iraqi capacity,” Rhodes said. “I think the Iraqi government itself recognizes that. Part of the question that we’re trying to answer here is how do we have a better ability to move quicker when we see those shortfalls.”

Hunt for escaped killers expands to Vermont; staffer under suspicion

Associated Press

DANNEMORA, N.Y. — The manhunt for two escaped killers expanded to campsites and boat slips in Vermont on Wednesday, and State Police said a female prison staff member being questioned may have had a role in helping the men.

At a news conference outside the maximum-security prison, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin said investigators learned that the inmates had talked before last weekend’s breakout about going to neighboring Vermont.

“We have information that suggests they thought New York was going to be hot. Vermont would be cooler, in terms of law enforcement,” Shumlin said on Day 5 of the search. “And that a camp in Vermont might be a better place to be. We do not.”

He and other officials would not say how authorities learned that information.

New York State Police Superintendent Joseph D’Amico also said that a prison employee — identified in news reports as Joyce Mitchell, a training supervisor at the prison tailor shop — had befriended the killers and “may have had some role in assisting them.”

He would not elaborate.



AP Photo/Seth Wenig

Law enforcement officers question a woman that lives near the prison in Dannemora, N.Y., as they searched houses near the maximum-security prison in northern New York where two killers escaped using power tools on Wednesday.

Mitchell’s son, Tobey Mitchell, told NBC that she checked herself into a hospital with chest pains Saturday. He said she wouldn’t have helped the inmates escape.

Using power tools, inmates David Sweat and Richard Matt cut through a steel wall, broke through bricks and crawled through a steam pipe before emerging through a manhole in the street outside the

3,000-inmate Clinton Correctional Facility in far northern New York, about 20 miles from the Canadian border.

The breakout was discovered early Saturday, meaning the inmates may have had a head start of several hours, Cuomo said.

Authorities suspect they had help from the inside in obtaining the power tools. Unions representing

“I have no information on where they are or what they’re doing.”

— Joseph D’Amico, New York State Police Superintendent

guards and civilian staff members at the prison said many have been questioned by investigators but no one has been suspended, disciplined or charged.

Vermont authorities are patrolling Lake Champlain and areas alongside it, Shumlin said. Cuomo urged the people of Vermont to be on the alert and report anything suspicious, warning: “Trust me, these men are nothing to be trifled with.”

As part of the search, state troopers and correction officers in helmets and body armor retraced their steps around the prison, checking garage doors, sheds, windows and other structures for signs of a break-in or other clues.

More than 450 federal and state law enforcement officers were taking part in the search, including customs agents, federal marshals and park rangers.

But at the late-afternoon news conference, D’Amico confessed: “I have no information on where they are or what they’re doing, to be honest with you.”

The killers’ mugshots have been put on more than 50 digital billboards in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, state police said, and a \$100,000 reward has been posted.

Law enforcement officials again asked the public to report anything out of the ordinary.

“We don’t want them out searching the woods,” Sheriff David Favro said. “But if you’re sitting on your porch, get your binoculars out and see if you see something unusual.”

In Dannemora, Barbara McCasland said officers asked to search her home but she told them no.

“I’m pretty battened down here,” she said. “My windows are locked and everything.”

As the manhunt dragged on, she said she was getting worried: “I wasn’t in the beginning, but seeing that they’ve been out there so long, I am a little nervous.”

Many in the prison town greeted the return of the searchers with a shrug.

Suicide bomber strikes near ancient temple

LUXOR, Egypt (AP) — Militants tried to attack the ancient temple of Karnak in southern Egypt on Wednesday, with a suicide bomber blowing himself up and two gunmen battling police. No sightseers were hurt in the thwarted assault, but it suggested that Islamic extremists are shifting targets from security forces to the country’s vital tourism industry.

The violence left the bomber and one gunman dead, the other wounded and arrested, and four other people wounded. The temple was not damaged.

The attackers carried guns in backpacks, and one wore a belt of explosives. They rode in a taxi through a police checkpoint to a parking lot and sat at a cafe and ordered lemonades,

witnesses told The Associated Press. The taxi driver, suspicious after they refused his offer to help with the packs, alerted police.

When a policeman approached, the bomber tried to hug him, but the policeman wrestled away. Seconds later, he detonated the explosives, and the others pulled automatic weapons from their bags and opened fire wildly, sending a small group of European tourists running for cover, the witnesses said.

Health head: Congress’ problem if court voids health law aid

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress and the states will need to find an answer if the Supreme Court strikes down the federal subsidies that are a foundation of President Barack Obama’s health care

law, his health secretary told lawmakers Wednesday.

Sylvia Burwell also said the president would reject any proposals restoring those subsidies that Republican lawmakers have already produced because all would roll back crucial elements of the overhaul law, in effect repealing it.

“Something that repeals the Affordable Care Act is something the president will not sign,” she said.

Burwell’s comments to the House Ways and Means Committee marked a continuation of Obama administration efforts to pressure Republicans should the justices void subsidies that help millions afford health insurance. A decision is expected this month.

The GOP runs Congress, and 26 of the 34 states likely to be hardest hit by such a decision have Republican governors. In addition, 22 of the 24 GOP senators up

for re-election next year are from those same 34 states.

Many Republican strategists have said the party would face retribution from voters in next year’s elections if the subsidies are eliminated and Congress does not advance legislation protecting the millions of people who would be hurt.

The case before the Supreme Court involves a Republican-backed challenge by conservatives to the 5-year-old health law. The suit says the law limits the subsidies to people in states that run their own insurance marketplaces — and not to residents of the 30-plus states that use the federal HealthCare.gov website.

Though many Republicans seem to favor extending the federal aid, none seem ready to back down from demands that other parts of the health law should be jettisoned.

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