

Local & State

WATER

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That water nourishes crops on more than 30,000 acres, mainly in Baker Valley, and the reservoir is a vital cog in the county's irrigation system.

Statistically speaking, the situation at the end of January was dire enough to justify Colton's concern.

On Jan. 31 the reservoir was holding slightly less than 6,400 acre-feet of water — about 8 percent of its capacity.

Only twice since Mason Dam was finished in 1968 has Phillips been lower on the final day of January — 2002 (4,900 acre-feet) and 1989 (4,233 acre-feet).

But then the weather turned.

Which is to say, winter made its belated arrival.

It was the wettest February on record at the Baker City Airport, with a precipitation total of 1.92 inches.

The storms that soaked the airport with rain and snow delivered mostly the latter to the mountains above Phillips — a key trend because Colton relies on that snowpack to replenish the reservoir each winter.

As of this morning, Phillips was impounding about 13,400 acre-feet.

That's still well below average for early April.

But one reason the reservoir has been relatively slow to refill, Colton said, is that persistent cool weather has retarded the rate of snowmelt in the mountains.

From his perspective that snow equates to money in the bank.

"The reservoir is still low, but I think it's going to be a good water year," Colton said in a cellphone interview Tuesday morning.

He was at that moment preparing to climb aboard a snowmobile and ride with one of his colleagues, Wes Morgan, to measure snow at Barney Creek in the headwaters of the South Fork of the Burnt River southwest of Unity.

Morgan manages the Burnt River Irrigation District, and the South Fork supplies much of the water for Unity Reservoir, that district's sole storage for irrigation water for the Burnt River Valley extending clear to Durkee.

Morgan's situation is rather different in that Unity Reservoir has about one-third



A helicopter ferried Baker City PublicWorks employees to Goodrich Lake on Monday, where they dug out the box that houses a valve controlling water releases from the lake. Goodrich is one of the city's two major supplementary water sources.

"The reservoir is still low, but I think it's going to be a good water year."

— Jeff Colton, manager, Baker Valley Irrigation District, talking about Phillips Reservoir

the capacity of Phillips.

Unity Reservoir has failed to fill only twice since Unity Dam was finished in 1938.

Unity Reservoir is about 65 percent full today. Morgan said he is releasing water through the dam at about half the rate it's entering the reservoir, to prevent it from filling too quickly this spring and increasing the chance of flooding farmland below the dam.

Colton, meanwhile, is trying to trap as much water as possible in Phillips Reservoir. He's releasing just a comparative trickle of water from Mason Dam — 6 cubic feet per second (cfs).

(The Powder River in Baker City is flowing at a much higher rate — about 100 cfs — due to snowmelt from

areas below the reservoir.)

Colton said it's impossible to say now how high the reservoir will rise through the spring and into early summer.

Multiple factors will affect its peak storage level, including how quickly the mountain snowpack melts, how much of that snow soaks into drought-parched soils rather than flowing into the reservoir, and how much demand there is for irrigation water during spring.

The latter factor will be affected largely by the weather.

Generally speaking, the more rain that falls during April, May and June, the less water Colton needs to release from the reservoir for irrigation.

No wonder, then, that he would prefer the cool, damp

pattern that has prevailed the past two months persist.

March couldn't maintain February's record-setting pace in that regard, but it was wetter than average.

The March precipitation total of 1.17 inches was 30 percent above average.

Although that ranked only as the 11th-wettest March at the airport, where records date to 1943, it was enough moisture to set a record for the February-March period.

The two-month total was 3.09 inches — more than double the average of 1.44 inches.

It surpassed the previous record set in 1983, when the two-month total was 2.86 inches (1.05 inches in February, 1.81 in March).

This was also just the third year at the airport when precipitation topped 1 inch in both February and March. The others were 1983 and 2014 (February 1.19 inches, March 1.04).

Although the mountain



Photo by Scott Foss

Snow has all but buried a cabin at Goodrich Lake, in the Elkhorn Mountains northwest of Baker City.

"We have a lot of snowpack up there. I think we're going to have a decent supply of water."

— Michelle Owen, Baker City public works director, referring to deep snow at Goodrich Lake

snowpack didn't deepen significantly in Northeastern Oregon during March, which can be one of the snowier months at higher elevations, neither did the pack shrink much.

At a few snow-measuring sites the water content in the snow — a more meaningful statistic, in determining water supplies, than is snow depth — is near all-time record highs for early April.

Eilertson Meadow, along Rock Creek in the Elkhorn Mountains west of Haines, is an example.

As of this morning the water content at that site, elevation 5,510 feet, was 16.2 inches.

In only one year since the station was installed there in 1980 has the water content been higher on April 3. That was in 1983, when the water content on that date was 20.5 inches.

The average for the date is 6.5 inches.

Baker City water supply looks good

About five miles southeast of Eilertson Meadow, in a basin at the base of 8,932-foot Elkhorn Peak, is Goodrich Lake.

Decades ago Baker City built a dam at the natural lake's outlet to increase its

holding capacity. The lake, which holds about 210 million gallons of water, is one of the city's two main supplemental sources of drinking water, along with a well.

The city gets most of its water from springs and streams in its 10,000-acre watershed, on the east slopes of the Elkhorns south of Goodrich.

Michelle Owen, the city's public works director, said her concern was not whether the lake would fill, but rather than it would fill too quickly.

To avoid that issue, city workers usually travel to Goodrich in early spring to partially open the valve in the dam that releases water, Owen said.

This year the snow is so deep that rather than have employees try to ride snowmobiles up the steep road leading to the lake, the city hired Baker Aircraft helicopter pilot Dustin Stephens to fly Scott Foss and Justin Plumbtree from the public works department, Owen said.

On Monday Stephens landed the chopper on the dam, and Plumbtree and Foss opened the valve to start releasing water.

"We have a lot of snowpack up there," Owen said. "I think we're going to have a decent supply of water."

Owen's optimism is of the cautious variety, however.

She remembers two years ago, when a similarly bountiful winter snowpack disappeared quickly due to warmer than usual spring weather.

"And we don't know how long and how hot this summer is going to be," Owen said.

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New Secretary of State fires 3 executives

By Andrew Selsky
Associated Press

SALEM — On Oregon Secretary of State Bev Clarno's first full day in office Monday, three executives in her department were dismissed.

The departures of Deputy Secretary of State Leslie Cummings, chief of staff Deb Royal and governmental and legal affairs director Steve Elzinga came just a day after Clarno, an 83-year-old Repub-

lican former lawmaker, was sworn in.

"Looking forward to serving Oregon as Secretary of State!" Clarno tweeted.

Clarno succeeds Dennis Richardson, a Republican who died in February of brain cancer. As the state's top election official, Clarno will be responsible for overseeing the 2020 elections.

She said via email that she starts work this week and will be requesting briefing materials for all secretary of state office initiatives, and will meet with staff and state leaders. Her office will not comment on any staff transitions "as they are personnel matters," her statement said.

Democratic Gov. Kate Brown, who has known Clarno for years, on Friday appointed her to the state's second-highest office under the agreement that she won't run for the office in the next election. Richardson's term ends in January 2021. Brown earlier told reporters that she wanted a secretary of state who would focus on overseeing elections instead of running for office.

Clarno served as House speaker from 1995 to 1997.

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