

Mountain snowpack above normal across Washington state

February 8 2016, by Nicholas K. Geranios

Mountain snowpack came in above normal in Washington state, raising hopes the normally soggy state will not repeat last year's drought conditions that helped fuel the worst wildfire season in its history, a federal agency said Monday.

Winter snowpack was 109 percent of normal across the state, but the numbers varied by location, according to a Feb. 1 report from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Some areas came in just below 70 percent, while others ranked close to 150 percent of normal.

Mountain snowpack is important because the snow melts during the spring and summer months and fills rivers and reservoirs across the state. There was little snow last year, and most of what fell melted early, leading to dry conditions that set the stage for catastrophic wildfires. The blazes burned more than 1 million acres and killed three firefighters.

Snow that fell early this winter allowed Washington to end its drought declaration in December, said Scott Pattee, a water supply expert for the agency. But he warned that the summer water supply could worsen if temperatures rise dramatically and precipitation drops in the next two months.

"But we're not going to be anywhere near where we were last year," Pattee said in a conference call.

Most river basins in Washington were reporting near or above normal

snowpack, despite temperatures that were slightly higher than usual in January, the snow report said.

"With 70 percent of our typical winter already past, the rest will be a coast as long as the temperatures don't elevate to the point to cause snowmelt," Pattee said.

Washington's report echoed a beneficial snowpack survey last month from another drought-stricken state: California.

Recent El Nino storms boosted the Sierra Nevada snowpack to 115 percent of normal—more than California has seen in five years. The Sierra snowpack contributes nearly one-third of California's water when it melts in the spring. However, officials say the snowpack would have to be at 150 percent of normal by April 1 to ease the four-year drought.

In Washington, a very wet fall helped fill many reservoirs to above-normal levels for this time of year. Reservoir levels can vary greatly due to how watersheds are managed for irrigation season, fisheries management, power generation, municipal demands and flood control, the Conservation Service said.

In terms of snowpack, the Skykomish River Basin reported the lowest readings at 68 percent of the 30-year median for Feb. 1. The Okanogan River Basin had the most snow with 146 percent of normal.

"It's critical that we had a good [snowpack](#) this year," Pattee said.

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