

Washington still suffers from drought despite rain—and El Nino won't help

October 23 2023, by Conrad Swanson, The Seattle Times



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Despite recent rainfall most of Washington still suffers from drought and climatologists say the months ahead aren't likely to offer much relief.

The entire state is forecast to remain warmer than normal and much of the state east of the Cascades is likely to see below-average precipitation between now and January, according to the latest seasonal outlook from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Around the first of the year, El Nino conditions are expected to begin pushing warm, tropical air into the Pacific Northwest, worsening the state's warm and dry spell, Washington state climatologist Nick Bond said.

The effects of the current drought might not be immediately apparent, especially in Western Washington, but the symptoms can be seen in below-average stream flows, low reservoir levels and dry soil moistures, Bond said.

Measuring drought amounts to more than "how wet your socks are," Bond said.

Drought conditions are likely to be compounded over the winter months, Bond said, spelling trouble for next year.

"I'd be really surprised if we had anything but a subpar snowpack," Bond said. "It might not be terrible but I bet it's below average."

Nearly half of Washington's [land area](#) already suffers from "extreme" or "severe" drought (10% and 36%, respectively), according to the latest data from the U.S. Drought Monitor.

Those conditions are worse than in July when [state officials](#) declared a drought emergency for watersheds across a dozen Washington counties.

In July, about 15% of the state was considered unaffected by [drought conditions](#). By now that number has shrunk to about 8%.

The drought emergency remains in effect and some counties across the state have imposed water restrictions.

Seattle has not remained unaffected by the conditions. Seattle Public Utilities last month asked customers to use less water, a voluntary conservation method triggered because their reservoirs hold less than 30% of their capacity.

Conditions have improved slightly since then but even with the recent rainfall, Seattle Public Utilities is still asking its 1.5 million customers to continue using less water. People across the utility's service area are still using too much water—about 109 million gallons per day—though that's trending downward toward the goal of 100 million gallons per day.

Seattle Public Utilities has asked customers to voluntarily conserve water six times since the 1980s. The last time it imposed mandatory cuts was 1992.

Climate change, caused by burning fossil fuels, is making hot and dry summers more frequent and deepening the severity of droughts.

The lack of water is also cutting into hydropower generation. This month, officials with Seattle City Light said the utility must raise rates in January to recoup the millions of dollars it lost during the warm, dry year.

Should precipitation increase, the increased rates might only last through early 2025, utility officials said, but if drought conditions persist, as expected, the higher rates could last years.

The seasonal outlook indicates that all of Washington is expected to see above-average temperatures through January, said Brad Pugh, a meteorologist with NOAA's Climate Prediction Center.

Below-average precipitation is expected for Eastern and Central Washington, Pugh said.

Areas west of the Cascades might see average precipitation, Pugh said, but with the current moisture deficits that likely wouldn't bring as much relief as needed.

Bond added that [warmer temperatures](#) mean that even if the region sees normal amounts of precipitation, much of it might come in the form of rain rather than snow.

"When it falls as rain and comes down the hillside in the winter time then we don't have it for the summer dry season" as snowmelt, Bond said.

With a diminished snowpack the [drought](#) effects would compound further, starting next year off on the wrong, dry foot.

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Citation: Washington still suffers from drought despite rain—and El Nino won't help (2023, October 23) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-10-washington-drought-rainand-el-nino.html>

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