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## Lack of late snow raises risk of fires

### West needs mountain runoff for water supply

By Patrick O'Driscoll  
USA TODAY

DENVER — Unexpected dryness and near-record warmth in March have melted much of the West's mountain snows early, worsening the potential for wildfires and extending the region's drought, federal water agencies reported Monday.

Late-season snow in March and April is a critical addition to the West's winter snowpack. Gradual meltoff in late spring and summer supplies water to most of the region.

The snowpack has shrunk by more than 30% in some places because of the warm, dry spring, according to the National Water and Climate Center. Many sites were at 25% to 50% of normal accumulation before the unseasonable warm temperatures hit.

"Mother Nature's been dealing some interesting cards," says Phil Pasteris, head physical scientist at the center, a branch of the Agriculture Department's Natural Resources Conservation Service. "For almost every basin in the West, we have lost snowpack."

In a water update due out this week, the Interior Department's Bureau of Reclamation notes that "all states in the West are gearing up for a potentially early and long fire season as a result of the drought and early snowmelt combination."

"The continuation of the drought is cause for concern," says Robert Johnson, commissioner of the bureau, which operates dams in 17 Western states and supplies water to 31 million people and 10 million acres of cropland.

Two giant reservoirs on the Colorado River, Lake Powell and Lake Mead, are about 100 feet below normal level. Spring runoff of melting snow from the Rockies into Powell is expected to be 53% of normal. The river supplies much of the Southwest, including Southern California.

Last year's deeper snowpack filled California's reservoirs enough to supply the state for the rest of this year. Frank Gehrke, snow survey chief for the California Department of Water Resources, says the state will need "a good snowpack" next winter to avoid a water shortage in 2008.

"Last year, we had four times as much snow on the ground as we do today," Gehrke says. Snowpack in the Sierra Nevada range is 38% of normal today. He says the flow of rivers and creeks will peak early next month, two to three weeks early. "Streams that might have had water in them in August and September, will pretty much be down to a trickle at that point," he says.

The worst snowpack losses are in the Southwest and central Oregon. The Reclamation Bureau says accumulations are "extremely low" in Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California and eastern Oregon. Snow has entirely melted at locations in central Arizona, Utah, northern Nevada and eastern Oregon weeks earlier than normal, the bureau says.

Conditions aren't expected to improve. No more snow is likely this season, and the National Weather Service foresees above-normal temperatures through midsummer in much of the region.

That could weigh heavily as wildfire scientists and experts meet this week in Boulder, Colo., to draft the annual fire season forecast.

The outlook comes as drought worsens in Southern California, where Los Angeles is on track for its driest rain season on record. A half-inch fell downtown Friday, the most since last May. The city is still nearly 1 foot below normal rainfall since July 1.

Drinking-water supplies could be stressed as the needs of cities, farms and the natural landscape combine in "a triple whammy" of demand, says climatologist Mark Svoboda of the National Drought Mitigation Center in Nebraska.

He says about 55% of the West is in drought, more than twice as much as a year ago.

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