

Sunday, June 26, 2005

2005 has had big runoff but not big flooding

By Natalie Clemens

Deseret Morning News

Despite heavy autumn rain and record-level snowpack across Utah, Brian McInerney, hydrologist with the National Weather Service, said this year was not an exceptional one for flooding.

"What stands out is it has been an above-average runoff year in volume and peak flows," McInerney said. "It seems bigger because we have come off of four to five years with low runoff."

Randy Julander, snow supervisor for the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service, said a lot of the initial runoff from the snow was absorbed by nearly empty reservoirs.

In mid-January, Julander said, it was apparent that snowpack levels were extremely high and plans were made to divert the water into canals and ditches.

"The big key here is the fact that we had three to four months to prepare and a lot of flood strategies worked," Julander said. But Julander said the state will be carrying a lot more water in its reservoirs into next year.

If snowpack levels are exceptionally high this coming winter, there would be less opportunity to run the peak flow off into the reservoirs.

But Julander said he doesn't think that will happen.

"You can't plan on having record snowpack years one after another because it's very rare," Julander said. "If we start seeing flooding, or if you see you are going to have a heavy snowpack year, you can let the water go."

Julander said the water could be routed to larger reservoirs like Lake Powell or Bear Lake.

Both Julander and McInerney said spring conditions were set in autumn when the soil was saturated with moisture.

"It's like a wet sponge," McInerney said of the saturated ground. "When you pour water on a wet sponge it runs off."

Mark Eubank, meteorologist for KSL-TV and radio, said it's too early to predict anything, but he wouldn't be surprised if next year is another wet year.

"When we get into a wet pattern we often get two wet patterns in a row," Eubank said.

Eubank said another wet year might be good for Utah.

"Bear Lake and Lake Powell need another year just like this to help," Eubank said. "We've had six or seven dry years, it will take several years to get Lake Powell up."

Eubank said the condition of the soil in the fall, how much snow the state gets in the winter and spring, and how fast the snow melts in the spring all play a key

role in how much flooding will occur. He said cooler weather conditions were ideal this spring because they slowed down the melting of the snowpack.

"We got by as absolutely as good as we could get by," Eubank said.

Areas in Cache Valley experienced moderate flooding earlier this year due to heavy rainfall, and areas along the Sevier River had moderate flooding due to runoff from the snow melting. McInerney said some areas of the eastern Uinta mountains have experienced recent flooding. He said they are still looking at Little Cottonwood Creek for potential flooding.

Julander said the Bear, Weber, Provo and Sevier rivers are all still running well above average.

"We still have high stream flow everywhere in the state," Julander said.

He said any heavy thunderstorm activity could trigger localized flooding.

Although there has been an increased amount of moisture this season, Julander said people still need to conserve.

"As we go further and further down the line and more people move into the state," Julander said, "the only way we're going to have enough water is if we all do our part and conserve."

E-mail: nclemens@desnews.com