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Drought far from over

Water agencies hoping for wet winter

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Despite record-setting rainfall and snows across the Rocky Mountains, the drought threatening regional water supplies in the Colorado River is a long, long way from over.

The federal Bureau of Reclamation has warned that even with normal amounts of precipitation this year and in coming years, it could be decades before levels return to normal. That spells continued uncertainty for Las Vegas, which receives about 90 percent of its drinking water from Lake Mead.

Still, after five years of drought this year's critical season for rain and snowfall along the river has started promisingly enough, with some gauges recording as much as four times the average precipitation for this time of year. The water year in the Rockies and the Colorado River starts in October.

"I have a little bit of good news," said Kay Brothers, deputy general manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority to her board Thursday. "It's going to take years to get out of the drought, but the October patterns are looking good.

"This is very early," she cautioned. "We still need to be very much on our drought plan."

Scientists, conservationists and officials with Western water agencies are among those hoping for a wet winter that would begin to reverse the worst drought in modern river history. The drought has led to conservation efforts in Las Vegas as the Bureau of Reclamation has instituted a cap on the amount of water the region can draw from Lake Mead.

Lake Mead is at 52 percent of its capacity, down by almost half in the last five years. Lake Powell, upstream from Mead, is at 38 percent of capacity, its lowest point since it started filling in the 1970s.

Kelly Redmond, regional climatologist with the Western Regional Climate Center in Reno, said the presence of El Nino, a reoccurring patch of warmer-than-average water in the Pacific Ocean, usually means more precipitation over the southern Rockies -- but maybe not this year.

"It could have an impact, but it may not be the one we're looking for," Redmond said. "There are a couple of things about this one. It's not real strong compared to other ones, and it's way out there in the Pacific. This is about as far west as it could get.

"There's somewhat conflicting evidence in terms of what it could bring for the West."

He said the historical record shows that El Ninos on the west side of the Pacific Ocean tend to correlate with drier years for the mountains.

"When we look back in the past, we see that not all El Nino years have been wet," Redmond said. "In looking into why they aren't all that way, this seems to be part of the answer."

Still, there is some good news for the water agencies that depend on the Colorado River to sustain millions of people and acres of farmland.

"The second half of October and first half of November brought a tremendous amount of precipitation, phenomenal amounts of rain. Really, in some cases more than we have ever seen," Redmond said. "In parts of the Colorado River system, it has helped to recharge the soil moisture."

The question of soil moisture is critical to runoff because in recent years much of the spring snow melt has been absorbed into the dry ground rather than running into the Colorado River. The early rain and snow help the ground recover, Redmond said.

"More of the precipitation that falls subsequently will have more of a chance to run into the Colorado River system," he said. "It doesn't guarantee an even average year (for runoff) but it has been helpful."

Pat Mulroy, general manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority, said that the early season precipitation has been helpful, but it is only a start.

"We had that last year too," she said. "We had some real high snowfalls, then in February we had higher temperatures," and much of that snow evaporated.

"You won't know what the runoff here is all about until the end of the snow season," Mulroy said.

Mulroy said scientists are still not sure what is happening to the climate along the Colorado River basin. Some warn that the "drought" conditions are more likely the normal conditions, and that the 20th century was made up mostly of abnormally wet years.

Others, including the environmental group Natural Resources Defense Council, are warning that the West is getting drier as a result of human-induced global climate change. Mulroy said she doesn't know what the future will bring.

The best the river users can hope for, she said, is probably a slow recovery -- and not a worsening situation. Either way, her agency has to be prepared to respond to the river conditions, Mulroy added.

"We deal with it as it is."

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