

Snowpack hits historic low at Denver watersheds, raising drought concerns

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DENVER (KDVR) — Denver's water supply is hitting historic lows as the warm, dry weather continues, raising the likelihood of drought restrictions in the coming months, according to Denver Water officials.

The utility, which serves about 1.5 million people in the metro area, relies heavily on mountain snowpack that melts and flows into reservoirs in the spring and summer. Snow accounts for roughly 90% of the city's water supply.

This winter, snowpack levels in the two watersheds that supply Denver are among the lowest recorded for late February in about 50 years of recordkeeping, the agency said.

In the South Platte River Basin, snowpack is at 47% of the normal for this time of year and is the lowest on record for this late in the winter, according to Denver Water. In the Colorado River Basin, snowpack stands at 56% of the normal amount, which is the second-lowest in recorded history.

"This is one of the worst snowpacks at this time of the year that we've seen," said Todd Hartman, a spokesperson for Denver Water.

Although recent mountain snow provided a modest boost to reservoirs, it did not bring the snowpack out of the deficit created during a dry December and January, officials said.

Hartman said it is too early to determine exactly what drought restrictions might look like, but some level of conservation measures is expected.

"It's pretty likely we could see at minimum asking our customers in a voluntary way to cut back — and if not voluntary, mandatory," Hartman said.

As dry and windy conditions persist, Denver Water is urging residents to be mindful of their water use. Officials say it is okay to hand-water trees and shrubs during winter months but advise against running sprinkler systems until May. They also encourage conservation inside your home, wherever possible.

"When you multiply that across many thousands of people developing better habits, it does start to make a difference," Hartman said. "Sometimes people think it doesn't matter what they do at home, but it does."

Denver Water officials said they will continue evaluating snowpack levels through Spring. To return to average conditions by April, the watersheds would need 10 additional feet of snow, Hartman said.

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