

Flow of Sierra streams lowest in century, hydrologist says

Associated Press

FALLON — After six years of drought, streamflows in the Sierra Nevada are lower now than they were in the Dust Bowl days in the 1930s, the Governor's Drought Committee has been told.

Otto Moosburner, a hydrologist with the U.S. Geological Survey, said precipitation in the northern Sierra over the last six years has averaged 65 percent of normal, while runoff from snowpack has averaged from 45 percent to 55 percent.

"We're going into some new territory," Moosburner said Friday.

The last major drought occurred from 1929 to 1934.

"The flow from the Sierra streams now is less than during that period," Moosburner said, estimating that current streamflows are about 20 percent less than during the Dust Bowl era and are "the least of any period of record since the turn of the century."

Experts said snowpack in critical watershed areas dissipated anywhere from three weeks to more than a month earlier this year than last.

Roy Kaiser, a snow hydrologist with the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, said above normal temperatures in April depleted the

snowpack in the Lake Tahoe and Carson River basins an average 32 days earlier this year than in 1991.

Areas along the upper Humboldt River in north central Nevada melted an average 40 days earlier.

The seven major reservoirs in Northern Nevada, as of the end of April, were at 10 percent of capacity, or 14 percent during average water years.

In contrast, the three reservoirs that make up the Lower Colorado River Basin in southern Nevada were at 87 percent of capacity, or 98 percent of average.

State Climatologist John James said April was one of the

warmest on record throughout the state, and the past water year one of the bleakest.

"It's the worst of the six years we've had," he said.

While a normal winter in the Sierra averages 48 snowstorms, there were only 21 this past season, he said.

The Reno-Sparks area received 2.6 inches of moisture, or 47 percent of normal precipitation, during the water year that began Oct. 1 and ended March 31.

Incline Village received 61 percent of normal; Carson City 45 percent; Fallon 78 percent; Elko 80 percent; Ely 85 percent; and Las Vegas 287 percent.

James said temperatures

around the state averaged 6 degrees to 7 degrees above normal through April, adding to the rapid decline of the snowpack and increasing evaporation rates.

"That's been the tone of this drought for the past six years," he said. "We're in a trend that's very, very similar to 1934."

Forecasters do not expect much of a break with the advent of summer.

"We're looking at only shower activity — spotty shower activity," said Steve Brown, area manager for the National Weather Service in Reno.

Temperatures in May are expected to remain at or above nor-

mal, with normal levels of precipitation, he said.

"Near normal of not much is not much," he said.

Tom Ballow, who heads the state Department of Agriculture, said federal funding is being sought to help ranchers provide emergency water to livestock.

"Streams are going to be drying up much faster," he said. "It's kind of a sad situation."

Wildlife officials said the drought has been particularly hard on Northern Nevada wetlands, which are expected to shrivel from a normal average of 50,000 acres to as low as 4,000 acres by the fall.