

Colorado snowpack melting

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In Grand Junction, Colo., this weekend, residents will be filling sandbags and keeping a wary eye on the Colorado River as it restlessly licks its banks, swollen with runoff from the heaviest snowpack in more than a decade.

Not quite 900 miles downriver, a treacherous whitewater trip through Cataract Canyon in southeast Utah and another between the towering walls of the Grand Canyon in northern Arizona, federal officials said Friday that Nevada's Lake Mead will barely show a ripple from the northern floodwaters.

For the reason why, look back up the river to Lake Powell, so drained by the drought of the past six years that not even the snowy Winter of '93 can slake its thirst.

"In general, the high waters on the upper river is not going to affect us one iota," said Bob Walsh, a spokesman for the Lake Mead office of the Bureau of Reclamation, which oversees use of the Colorado River. "We have so much vacant space in the system, even with the runoff we won't be at capacity."

The entire Colorado River storage system is holding about 72 percent of its capacity of 60 million acre-feet, Walsh said. Lake Mead, at 85 percent, is on the high end, the average driven down by Lake Powell at just over 60 percent.

Current forecasts say the elevation of Lake Powell will rise 24 feet between now and the end of June, while Lake Mead is expected to remain stable at 1,190 feet above sea level into September.

That's a long way from July 1983, when Lake Mead hit its all-time high elevation of 1,226 feet above sea level, eventually forcing the bureau to lower the level by opening spillways on Hoover Dam for only the second time since the dam was built.

As it is now, the Colorado in 1983 and again in 1984 was bubbling with runoff from a winter of snows. The difference is, this year, Lake Powell is recovering from a long dry spell that drew off nearly half its capacity.

Walsh said as of May 12, the Colorado system has 16 million to 17 million acre-feet of storage available, more than enough to hold the projected runoff along the system of 15 million acre-feet, "and a lot of that has already occurred."

At the same time, Lake Mead is releasing water constantly to meet the needs downstream, Walsh said, which explains why the lake will remain level even as the melting snow pours down from the north. Last year, the bureau released 8 million acre-feet of water to users below Hoover Dam.

The water upriver is expected to crest within the next 10 days, officials say, perhaps over the Memorial Day weekend. Mike Reddy, deputy director of the Colorado Office of Emergency Management, said Friday state authorities are watching the Colorado and its tributaries for any signs of flooding and are urging residents along the river to be prepared.

The No. 1 factor in the potential flooding is the snowpack, Reddy said, which is as much as 200 percent of normal in some of the mountains that drain into the Colorado River basin.

"What we're seeing is rivers running bank to bank," Reddy said, the melting snow bolstered by warm spring rains that have forced the Colorado over its banks at Glenwood Springs and Grand Junction. "We have deployed a tremendous amount of sandbags around the West Slope."

Reddy said the snowpack is comparable to 1984, when flooding caused \$29 million in damage around Colorado.