

April 1, 2015

Snowpack Takes a Dive

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Kremmling Field Office snow surveyor Mark Volt took the April 1 snow survey measurements during the last days of March. Snowpack for Middle Park and the upper Colorado River Basin stands at only 78% of average. We were at 144% last April 1st. and 62% in the drought year of 2002.

Snowpack in the mountains above Middle Park now ranges from 26% to 107% of the 30-year average.. Snow density is averaging 28%, which means that for a foot of snow there are 3.3 inches of water. Irrigators, towns, river runners and other water users can expect lower than normal river levels this summer. From this point on, spring runoff will be highly dependent on melting conditions (i.e., temperature and wind), as well as spring snow accumulation and/or rainfall. While late season snowstorms large enough to provide the kind of moisture we need are possible, they are not probable! Fortunately reservoir storage in the Colorado River Basin currently stands at 124% of average.....And be glad we don't live in California where the snowpack is reported to be at only 6% of average.)

Statewide, significant snowpack gains in late February and early March were a result of a short-lived weather pattern lasting only until March 6th. Afterward, the proverbial faucet shut off yielding minimal precipitation through the remainder of March. The period of March 6th through April 1st 2015 was the second driest for the period of record dating back to 1986, only 2012 saw a drier March 6th through April 1st period.

To compound the issue, early spring temperatures this year have caused snowpack melt, observed most particularly at lower and some mid-elevation SNOTEL sites. Seasonal snowpack decline this early in the spring is rare and only occurs in one out of every ten years. Water year 2012 was the extreme case in which snowpack began melt and continued unabated for the remainder of the spring due to above normal temperatures.

Reported average readings for the major river basins in Colorado are as follows: Colorado River Basin 78%; Gunnison River Basin, 63%; South Platte River Basin, 87%; Yampa and White River Basins, 65%; Arkansas River Basin, 87%; Upper Rio Grande Basin, 60%; San Miguel, Dolores, Animas, and San Juan River Basins 49%; and Laramie and North Platte River Basins, 76%.

Most of the snow courses around Middle Park have been read since the 1940s. Snow course readings are taken at the end of each month, beginning in January and continuing through April. March is historically the snowiest month, and the April 1 readings are the most critical for predicting runoff and summer water supplies, as most of our high country snowpack peaks around that time. Manual snow courses will be read for the final time this year at the end of April.

For further information, including real-time snow and precipitation data for SNOTEL (automated Snow Telemetry) sites, visit <http://www.co.nrcs.usda.gov/snow/index.html>.

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NRCS Kremmling Field Office snow survey for April 1, 2014, compared to long-term average.

Snow course or SNOTEL	Last year		This year		30-year average (1981 - 2010)		Percent of average	
	Snow depth	Moisture content	Snow depth	Moisture content	Snow depth	Moisture content	Snow depth	Moisture content
	------(inches)-----						-----(%)------	
Arapaho Ridge st		26.1		17.1		19.8		86%
Berthoud Summit st		22.7		15.1		18.6		62%
Buffalo Park st		20.4		13.5		10.5	suspect!	129%
Columbine st		34.6		14.9		22.8		65%
Copper Mountain st		19.8		14		13.7		102%
Corral Creek sc		not read		not read	45	14.6		#VALUE!
Elliot Ridge st				13				
Fremont Pass st		19		16.3		15.2		107%
Gore Pass sc	45	15.3	28	8.3	34	10.6	82	78%
Granby sc	45	14.8	24	6.9	26	7.2	92	96%
Grizzly Peak st		23.6		15.6		16.2		96%
Jones Pass st		18		13.2		13.4		99%
Lake Irene st		31.2		19.9		24.3		82%
Lynx Pass st		13.4		7.4		10.9		68%
Middle Fork Camp sc	42	13.7	31	8.1	35	10.1	88	80%
Phantom Valley st		12.1		7		9.3		75%
Stillwater Creek st		not read		1.8		7		26%
Summit Ranch st		13.8		7.3		11.4		64%
Willow Creek Pass sc	49	14.3	27	8.3	44	12.5	61	66%
<i>Average</i>								78%

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NRCS Kremmling Field Office snow survey April 1 moisture content records.

Snow course or SNOTEL (SC or ST)	Highest Apr. 1 moisture content			Lowest Apr. 1 moisture content		
	(inches)	(%)	(year)	(inches)	(%)	(year)
Arapaho Ridge ST (read since 2003)	26.9	117%	2008	14.8	65%	2010
Berthoud Summit ST	25.3	138%	1996	10.9	59%	2002
Buffalo Park ST (read since 1996)	17.7	123%	1996	8.0	56%	2002
Columbine ST	37.9	152%	1984	12.0	48%	1981
Copper Mountain ST	18.1	129%	2008	7.9	56%	1981
Corral Creek SC (read since 1995)	16.9	116%	1996	8.0	55%	2002
Fremont Pass ST	21.9	135%	1978	10.0	62%	1966
Gore Pass SC	16.6	157	2011	4.3	41%	1966
Granby SC	14.8	206%	2014	0.0	0%	2004
Grizzly Peak ST	27.7	151%	1996	8.7	47%	1981
Jones Pass ST (read since 2000)	19.2	119%	2006	9.7	60%	2002
Lake Irene ST	37.6	146%	1962	11.8	46%	1977
Lynx Pass ST	20.8	163%	1962	6.0	47%	1977
Middle Fork Campground SC	17.0	168%	1996	5.8	57%	1981
Phantom Valley ST	14.9	160%	1996	1.1	12%	2004
Stillwater Creek ST (read since 1986)	12.8	164%	1965	1.1	14%	2012
Summit Ranch ST	17.0	153%	1996	5.9	53%	2012
Willow Creek Pass SC	20.5	164%	1952	6.6	53%	2012