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Region braces for water shortage
Dan J. Williams

Elephant Butte Reservoir was about half-full last week and is expected to drop even more because of a light snowpack this winter at the headwaters of the Rio Grande in southern Colorado.

Farmer Tommy Simpson's water nightmares are based on reality -- the hot summer days in 1954 when Elephant Butte Reservoir was "a stinky mess," the water level at its lowest since the dam was finished in 1914. His dreams are a hope and a prayer that another El Niño may pull the region out of a five-year drought that threatens his Mesilla Valley pecans, onions and alfalfa with a thirst they haven't experienced in five decades.

"It worries me," Simpson said of reports that the snowpack that feeds the Rio Grande is only 44 percent of normal this month. "Personally, I think we're headed into another prolonged drought." While some forecasters say chances are good that another El Niño will bring wetter than normal weather patterns to the Southwest as soon as next fall, area farmers and El Pasoans who depend on the Rio Grande are bracing for the worst.

"It's pretty scary," said Edd Fifer, general manager of the El Paso County Water Improvement District, which supplies irrigation water to 1,500 large farms and 2,500 smaller farms in the county. "Being in a drought here is not the problem. The problem is the drought moving up into northern New Mexico and southern Colorado."

This year's snowpack at the headwaters of the Rio Grande in southern Colorado is very low, said Wayne Treers, a water resource specialist with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

"And it looks worse for next year," Treers said. Unless the region gets above-average snowfall in the next two months, "we are going to drop like a rock at the Butte this year," he said. "With the current runoff forecast, it looks like the Butte may drop this summer to 25 percent of full."

Even with a low runoff, farmers and the city of El Paso will get their full allotment of Rio Grande water this spring and summer, Treers said. Although the Elephant Butte and Caballo reservoirs are less than half full, there is still enough to supply everyone with the same amount of water they've received since 1978.

"But this may be the last year we're OK," said James Narvaiz, hydrology director for Elephant Butte Irrigation District, which supplies water to more than 5,500 farms in Doña Ana County. He said that once farmers use their allotted water this year, the reservoir levels could reach near-record lows.

"We're telling farmers that it looks kind of bleak," Narvaiz said. "And we're noticing a lot of people getting their pumps cranked up and tuned up."

Although irrigation districts use most of the river water, the city of El Paso also will feel the pinch of any water reductions. "Historically, every 20 years we hit some cycle of drought," said Ed Archuleta, general manager of El Paso Water Utilities. "The problem is that while in years past ... municipalities were not impacted ... now we (city) are 40 percent dependent on river water."

As the Hueco bolson, the city's major underground water source, continues on its projected course to depletion in 2025, officials are scrambling to prepare for a worst-case scenario should the river supply run low. Last year, El Pasoans used more than 34 billion gallons of water, down about 1 billion gallons from 2000. Officials credited the drop to conservation efforts and higher water costs.

"We're doing a number of things to prepare ourselves," Archuleta said. Those preparations include conservation programs, buying water rights outside the county for future use, and drilling new wells in the plentiful Mesilla bolson that the city shares with Southern New Mexico. "We're drilling 12 new wells over the next three years in the Mesilla and 10 new wells on the East Side in the Hueco," Archuleta said. "We should have enough capacity in the groundwater systems to handle a drought, unless there is a major cutback in (river) supply." The new wells tapping the Hueco bolson would only be used in a water emergency, Archuleta said.

Emergency possible

Such an emergency could be on the horizon, said Douglas LeComte, senior meteorologist with the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Prediction Center in Maryland. He said most short- and long-range forecasts show little climate changes in the Rio Grande watershed and West Texas, which have experienced drought conditions for the past five years.

"Right now there is way below-normal snow water content up there," he said of the Rio Grande headwaters. "In addition to that, this is the time of year you don't expect very much precipitation in West Texas and New Mexico."

The good news for the region, LeComte said, is that weather experts are seeing signs that another El Niño may arrive soon, bringing with it more moisture than normal to the Southwest.

"That would be great news for us, but maybe not so great for people in areas that flood," farmer Simpson said. The last significant El Niño was in 1997 and 1998, LeComte said. But while it brought more snow and rainfall to the area, it did little to reverse an apparent long-term weather pattern of continued dryness. "A lot of people in the Southwest are

concerned about a change to drier patterns," he said. "A lot of portions of the Southwest have been on the wet side for the past couple decades. That may not continue."

Spoiled no more

Fifer of the El Paso County Water Improvement District said area farmers have been spoiled by plentiful river water for 24 years. A return to the dry years of the 1950s could be devastating, he said, because unlike New Mexico farmers, who can tap into a good underground water source, the aquifer beneath El Paso farmers is quite different. "It's full of dissolved solids -- salt," he said. The projected low runoff worries area environmentalists who have been fighting to restore the Rio Grande bosque and save endangered species in the river, such as the silvery minnow. "Low runoff means the river and the ecosystem, particularly fish species, go to the bottom of the list," said Bess Metcalf, director of the Rio Grande Basin Coalition, a group dedicated to preserving the river. "My sense is that for species on the brink, it would probably spell the end -- except in fish tanks somewhere."

About half full

Friday, the water level at Elephant Butte Reservoir was about half its capacity, said Ray Kirkpatrick, superintendent at Elephant Butte State Park. He said recreational activities and visitation at the lake probably won't be affected by a low runoff, even if the lake drops to 25 percent full.

"Our main concern is maintaining good lake access to the public and having our navigation buoys in place for safe passage," Kirkpatrick said of the park, which attracts 80,000 to 100,000 visitors every Memorial Day and Fourth of July. He said the main boat ramp was constructed when the lake was very low, "so we will always have launching capability there." Low water at the Butte also has its positive side: bigger beaches for the crowds, Kirkpatrick said.

"I actually like the level of the lake right now," he said. "The beaches are really nice ... people have more breathing space." Dan J. Williams may be reached at dwilliams@elpasotimes.com