

Utah's snowpack could mean flooding if spring turns warm

By **Jody Genessy**

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A series of California storms walloped the St. George area and sparked the recent flash floods in southwestern Utah. Other parts of the state could be deluged in the next few months — but for other reasons.

Areas from Cache County to Dixie are at risk of flooding from spring runoff due to saturated ground and above-normal snowpack levels.

"The potential for flooding is really exaggerated this season, particularly if we get a real warming trend this spring," said Ron Francis, a public affairs specialist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's natural resources conservation service. "And these could happen all over the state. It's something people have got to watch carefully."



A warm spring could cause flooding from snow-capped Pine Valley Mountain near St. George.

Stuart Johnson, Deseret Morning News

Only three moisture-measuring stations in the state reported lower-than-average snowpack/water equivalent levels on Friday's updated NRCS snow-precipitation report. But the vast majority of SNOTEL measuring stations show staggering seasonal averages, with the driest region (Price-San Rafael) at 136 percent and the highest (Virgin River) peaking at 317 percent of normal moisture levels. Those figures are similar to the snowpack of 1983, known as the "year of floods" throughout much of Utah.

Midway Valley above Cedar City reported a snow-water equivalent level 435 percent higher than average. It now has 47.4 inches (more than 120 inches of snow) compared to a normal 10.9 inches for this time of year. Other extremely wet spots include stations at Trout Creek (414 percent) in the Green River basin, Widtsoe No. 3 (385 percent) in the Escalante River region, and Harris Flat (382 percent) and Agua Canyon (364 percent) in the Sevier River area.

Other regional updates in Friday's snow-precipitation report: Bear River (148 percent); Weber, Ogden rivers (153 percent); Duchesne River (223 percent); Dirty Devil (169 percent); southeastern Utah (234 percent); Sevier River (223 percent); Provo River, Utah Lake, Jordan River (165 percent); Tooele Valley, Vernon Creek (176 percent); Green River (199 percent); Escalante River (298 percent) and Beaver River (169 percent).

Key to flooding will be how much more moisture comes between runoff time (about April 1) and how quickly the temperatures rise this spring.

"It could be a really interesting year, unfortunately," Francis said. "But we like the moisture, if we can get it to come easy, that'd be good. . . . If we get a dry and a warm spell in the spring all at once, it could be a more serious problem."

The state will seek and likely receive federal funding from the emergency watershed program, Francis said. This would allow watershed structures at small reservoirs — such as the damaged Baker Dam outside of St. George, which holds 21,000 acre feet of water — to mitigate any more flooding. Francis said some of the state's 91 such structures, some of which are 50 years old and were built as part of a federal program, need structural rehabilitation. He added that managers of the dams need to be cognizant of maintaining them at proper water levels to help avoid future problems.

"We're not saying anybody's in imminent danger now," he said. "But we're saying they've got to be looked at."

A successful example of how the emergency watershed program helped following a local disaster took place after fires scorched natural vegetation on the Farmington benches two years ago. Funds were used to erect sediment structures — metal poles with plastic sheets spread between them — in gullies to prevent flooding. The traps, Francis said, caught a lot of sediment after storms, including up to three-foot boulders, and protected homes and major drinking water supplies.

The potential for flooding in the next week is decreasing throughout the state, said Todd Hall of the National Weather Service.