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Outlook bleak for state's water supplies

By John Fleck / Journal Staff Writer

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A January that may go down as the driest on record in New Mexico has left a meager snowpack that appears likely to leave the Rio Grande parched for its fourth consecutive year, according to the preliminary February runoff forecast.

At San Marcial, the point in central New Mexico where the Rio Grande enters Elephant Butte Reservoir, the forecast calls for runoff of just 30 percent of the long-term average.

This week's storm, which whitened the northern half of New Mexico, will help a little, water managers say, but it is a far cry from what is needed to bail the state out of an increasingly serious drought.

"It convinced me that snow does still fall. I'd started to doubt it," said Phil King, a hydrologist and adviser to the Elephant Butte Irrigation District. "It's a drop in the bucket, or a snowflake in the bucket, as the case may be."

For now, the forecast is encouraging. The National Weather Service has issued a winter storm watch for much of north-central New Mexico today, with several inches of new snow possible, including in the Albuquerque metro area.

Forecasters warned that travel could be difficult this afternoon and this evening on Interstate 25 from the Santa Fe area to the Colorado border, with the possibility of rain and snow across parts of New Mexico through Friday.

But in the longer term, the forecast favors a return of dry weather, with odds favoring warm and dry weather across New Mexico through the end of April.

The National Climatic Data Center is still tallying up rainfall reports from around New Mexico, but preliminary indications suggest January 2014 could go down as the driest January statewide since record-keeping began more than a century ago, according to Deirdre Kann of the National Weather Service's Albuquerque office. Albuquerque on Monday night got its first measurable precipitation since December, finally ending a 43-day dry streak that is the longest winter period without rain or snow in records going back to 1920.

Because of the way drought's impacts accumulate over time, this could be a particularly difficult year for both farmers and the wildlife that depend on the river system.

The last time New Mexico saw a comparable four straight years of low Rio Grande flows was 1953-56, King said.

The farmers King advises, in the Rio Grande Valley from Caballo to the Texas border, are particularly vulnerable to drought. Their primary source of irrigation supply is Rio Grande water from Elephant Butte Reservoir, which is likely to be in short supply in 2014 for the fourth straight year, King said.

Many lower Rio Grande farmers have groundwater pumps to fall back on, but that water is declining too.

"The groundwater is finite," King said.

Wildlife along the river corridor, including the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow and other species that do not have legal protections, also are suffering from the drought's cumulative effects, said Jen Pelz, wild rivers program director for the environmental group WildEarth Guardians.

"One year of drought stresses the wildlife," Pelz said. "Once you have four consecutive years of drought, the stress is compounded."

A scientific survey done in October found silvery minnows alive at just three of 20 sites checked, a continuation of a population crash that began in 2010. Most of the fish found in last year's surveys for the Middle Rio Grande Endangered Species Collaborative Program had been raised in hatcheries and released into the river, with few native fish remaining, according to the program's survey report.

Pelz's group has filed legal notices over the minnow's troubles, raising the possibility that Rio Grande drought management may be further complicated this year by Endangered Species Act litigation.

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