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Uneven snowpack means universal drought concern

By Gary Harmon

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An uneven water supply picture has the managers of the three big Grand Valley domestic water suppliers looking anxiously to the peaks in search of new snow, to weather forecasts for hope, and to each other for help.

The bright spot — and one that could fade quickly in the late winter sun — is the snowpack covering the Grand Junction city water supply, which began February at 98 percent of normal.

The farther east, however, the lighter the snowpack. Ute Water Conservancy District's winter storehouse of snow is 75 percent of normal and the Upper Colorado River Basin overall is 77 percent of normal. The latter total is of greatest import to customers of Clifton Water District, which gets its water from the Colorado River.

The top managers of the three agencies are meeting regularly to prepare for the possibility that a dry winter and spring will force them to take extraordinary measures as the days grow longer and the Colorado River shrinks.

The specter of another disaster, such as the Pine Ridge Fire last year on the north side of the Bookcliffs, could require measures such as water rates designed to punish high water use, and prohibitions on the outdoor use of domestic water, such as for lawn watering.

"We all might be one natural event from having to go to the other entities" for help with water, Clifton Water General Manager Dale Tooker said.

The three systems all are interconnected, largely as a response to the 1977 drought, but each agency forecasts its water use separately, meaning one would have to use its reserves to help out another provider. That would put unanticipated strains on the water delivery system.

The three agencies cover one another "on a handshake," said Greg Trainor, Grand Junction utility and street systems director. "There are no formal agreements."

Another strain could arise if low river flows make it impossible for ditch companies, which serve agricultural interests, to draw water from the Colorado.

In those circumstances, residents of subdivisions that use ditch water for their lawn watering, garden-tending and other outdoor uses will invariably start using domestic water for those activities.

"Until they get their bills," Ute Water General Manager Larry Clever said.

One bright note for Colorado River water users is that the Shoshone generating station is close to calling its full 1,200 cubic feet per second of water down the stream. It hasn't demanded its full water right for the last several years, Clever said.

The three agencies would prefer to avoid confrontations with unhappy customers and are beginning to fashion ways of urging residents to hold down water use.

No half-measures, such as odd-even watering schedules, are likely to be effective because of the difficulty in monitoring them, Clever said.

The domestic-water agencies are hoping to work with irrigation-water suppliers to better manage their response to the drought but have yet to drum up enthusiasm, Clever said.

“We can make it,” Clever said, “If something happened to one of us, we might have to put restrictions on, but we can make it. But if we get three or four of these (drought years,) we’re in trouble.”