

WATER AND DROUGHT

'It's a mess'

Winter water storage half of average through January

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Winter water storage was half of average at the end of January as drought conditions deepened.

Under a water court decree, the winter water program allows nine large ditches, as well as two smaller ones, to store water in the winter months for use later in the irrigation season. Storage began Nov. 15 and ends March 15.

But snowpack in the Arkansas River basin is at only 64 percent of average, while stream flows have been at subpar levels since June.

A little more than 45,000 acre-feet of water were in storage at the end of January, compared with a 20-year average of more than 94,000 acre-feet at the same time over the last 20 years. Last year at this time there were about 86,000 acre-feet in storage.

"It's a mess. It's not good," said Lamar farmer Dale Mauch, who also sits on the Fort Lyon Canal board. "We've been battling this since 2002, and we're looking at running out of water by June 1 if things don't improve."

In a normal year, the Fort Lyon Canal — the largest user of winter water — would wait until river flows drop in mid-June to begin running water stored in lakes.

Last year, in order to start crops, all of the water was run early and gone by June 1.

The drought, now in its third year, has left soil drier than usual as well, meaning the water won't go as far.

An average or wet spring could improve the outlook, because 2012 started better than 2013, until snow started melting off in March, rather than May.

"The good news is that a storm could get here by the weekend, and it could be a big one," Mauch said. "You've got to have hope." cwoodka@chieftain.com



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