

Snowpack melting fast despite April storms

By Paige Blankenbuehler, High Country News

Throughout late March and into April, much of the West experienced unseasonably warm days. Then, in late April, temperatures plummeted in Southwest Colorado's San Juan Mountains and more than 2 feet of wet, heavy spring snow fell. Suddenly, ski boots were out again and for a day or two, it felt like winter was back.

But those storms have only helped a small fraction of the West, with much of the moisture buoying snowpack levels along the Eastern Rockies in Colorado and Wyoming. Meanwhile, the rest of the region is on the opposite trajectory, losing snowpack at record-breaking rates.

At the beginning of April, snowpack levels across the region were "near normal," says Cara McCarthy, deputy director for the National Water and Climate Center in Portland, under the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

But in just the few short weeks since, that snow is melting faster than climate hydrologists have seen in nearly four decades, bringing the snowpack far below normal in most states in the West.

For California, in its fifth year of drought, this season has been a bit of a roller coaster. In January, snowpack readings increased to 127 percent of normal (up from 90 percent in December) – good news for a state where 30 percent of the water supply is dependent on snow.

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