



Harney Basin Starts Year with Favorable Snowpack Data

In some places the snow water equivalent is more than 300 percent of normal

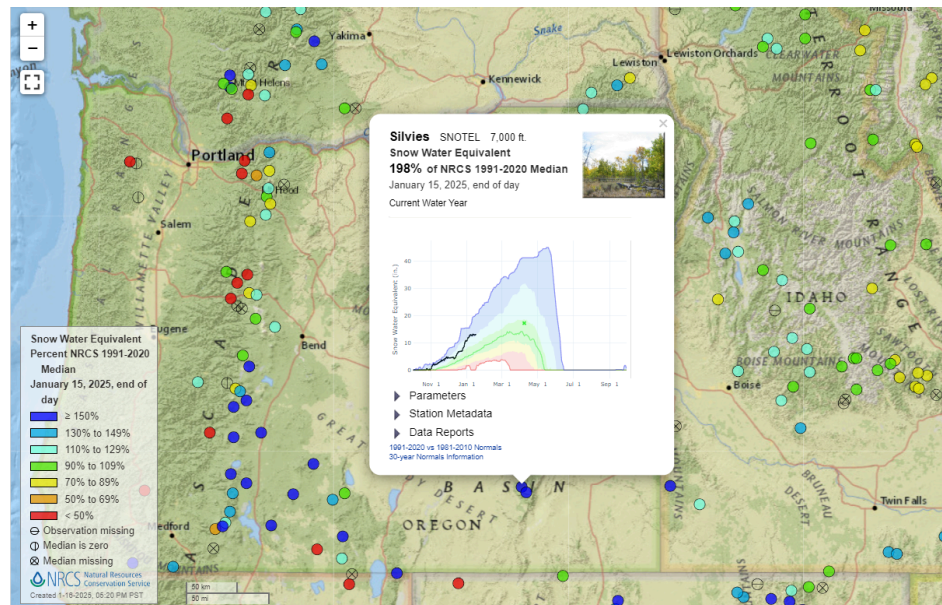
January 2025
by Lauren Brown

When the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) released its annual winter weather outlook in October, it predicted a slowly developing La Nina weather pattern, which would mean wetter than average weather for

Oregon and the Pacific Northwest.

That has proven to be the case for the last few months in the Harney Basin. As of Jan. 7, the snow water equivalent data provided by the Natural Resources Conservation Service at Snow Mountain was 377 percent of normal and at the Rock Springs site, it was 370 percent of normal.

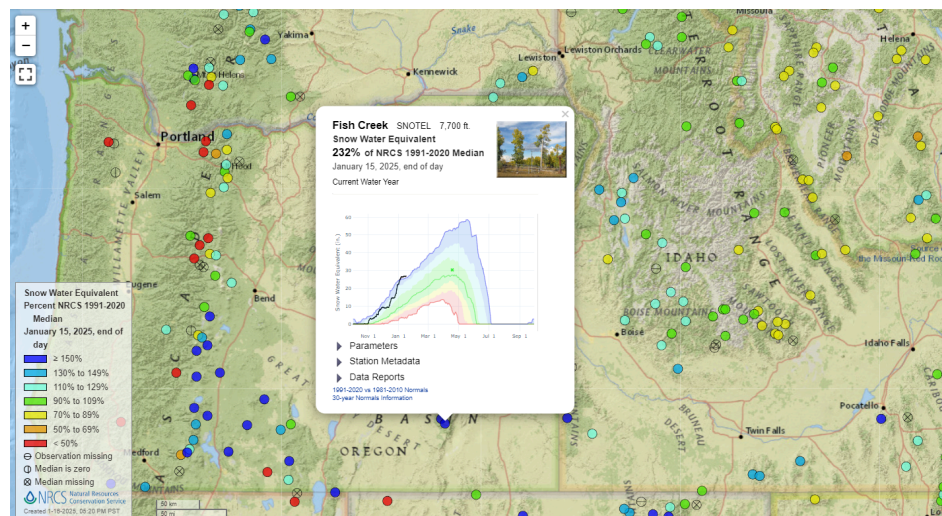
Tony Svejcar, Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative partner and retired rangeland scientist and research leader with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is cautiously optimistic about the snowpack data so far. "I don't think a lot of us probably realize just how much precipitation we got in the fall," he said.



Other local data that supports the wetter forecast predictions are the yearly precipitation totals recorded at Burns Municipal Airport. For the water year starting October 1, 2024, the airport has recorded 8.86 inches as of Jan. 7. On average, Burns records about 10.92 inches of rainfall per year, so with 8.86 inches just three months into the water year, the basin could be on track to have a very healthy water year if the rainfall continues at the current rate. "It's a heck of a start compared to what we've had in the past. And yes, it could shut off. That's always a possibility," Svejcar said. "But I'd rather shut off from here than from 75 percent of normal."

Screenshots taken Jan 15 from the NRCS National Weather and Climate Center show snowpack for Silvies and Fish Creek.

Casey Shelman, manager of the Bell-A Ranch, heard about the rainfall data at the airport and, while grateful for the precipitation, is concerned about possible flooding through the winter and spring. "I live on the river, and I've never seen the river run as consistently as it has in the last six weeks this time of year. I've been here 42 years," Shelman said. "Everything is wet. It's almost too



wet.” Shelman said that the basin can run the gamut of extremes. “We’re either extremely dry or extremely wet. I’m just glad to have some moisture and hate to complain,” he said.

However, more water creates other problems. Shelman said that while he has removed boards and opened water structures for better flow, the increased amount of water also means more trash gets through, which can also block flow. Removing that trash can be difficult and, at times, cost prohibitive.

With more precipitation, it’s also important to try to keep hay dry, especially with calving season approaching. “A lot of this hay is taking on so much moisture that if you don’t tarp it, the top bales are pretty well ruined,” Shelman said. “If you feed it to cattle, it will abort calves.”

With rain and water comes mud. “I know a lot of people don’t like laying in the mud,” Shelman said. Wet, muddy conditions are not ideal for calving. “People might need to head to higher ground to calve their cows,” Shelman said. “It’s going to be a challenge with water running everywhere to have a baby born.”

Shelman has observed some variability in the snowfall this year. “If you get 10 miles south of town, you pretty much run out of snow. I’ve never really seen it rain quite like this. We’d have five feet of snow if it all came in snow form instead of rain form,” he said.

Anecdotally, Svejcar observed something similar in how the snow has hit some parts of the county but melted off quickly in others. “At my place, I probably had three or four inches a couple of days ago. We went across and visited our neighbors, and they had two or three times as much as we did,” he said. His neighbors live just about a mile away. “I went into town, and they had more than I had as well. The variability can be tremendous, and if you’re in the wrong spot, it may not seem like we’ve had that much precipitation,” he said.

Svejcar noted that it’s important to look at the hard numbers. “This is why I always go to data because we’re all paying attention to the climate and all that, but you don’t accumulate it. So, you may remember those dry two weeks we had toward the end of November, and that may make more of an impression than a storm that we got with two or three days of precipitation in a row,” he said.

As we proceed into the heart of the winter months, the variability of the weather and snowfall will keep ranchers and land managers guessing, but if the NOAA forecast holds, the Harney Basin could be bracing for a very wet spring.

This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative.

