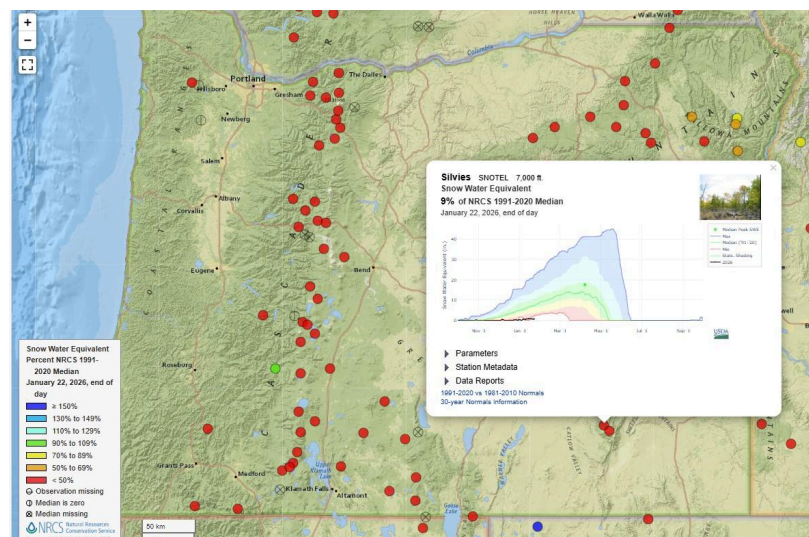# Warm Winter Brings Rain Instead of Snow to Harney Basin

February 2026
by Lauren Brown

The Harney Basin's winter so far has been wet—but not white. Early data shows the region is getting plenty of precipitation, but it's falling as rain rather than the snow that ranchers and land managers typically count on.

The Numbers Tell an Unusual Story

As of early January, snowpack levels are running well below normal at key monitoring sites. Snow Mountain, northwest of Burns, sits at just 62 percent of normal snowpack, while Rock Springs to the north is at 58 percent.
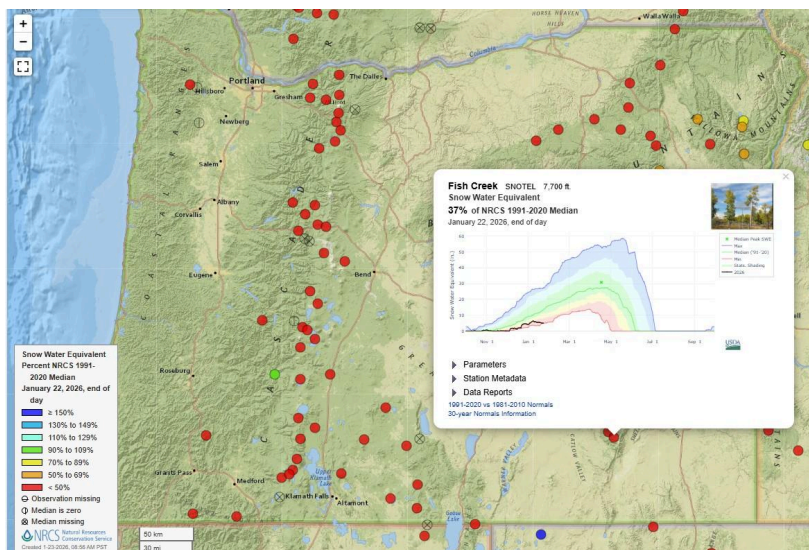
Screenshots taken Jan 23, 2026 from the NRCS National Weather and Climate Center show snow water equivalent for Silvies at 9% and Fish Creek at 37% in comparison to Jan 15, 2025 where Silvies was at 198% and Fish Creek was at 232%.

But here's the twist: total precipitation—which includes both rain and melted snow—is running at or above 100 percent of normal. December alone brought 121 percent of normal precipitation at Snow Mountain and 142 percent at Rock Springs.

"Snowpack is really low," said Tony Svejcar, a retired rangeland scientist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture who works with the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative. "But then if you look at precipitation, it's mostly 100 percent."

That rainfall is showing up in the region's rivers. The Silvies River is running at 187 percent of its 30-year average, while the Donner und Blitzen is at 159 percent.

Why Snow Matters More Than Rain

For ranchers and land managers, the difference between rain and snow is crucial.

Snow that accumulates in the mountains acts like a natural reservoir, storing water through the winter and releasing it gradually in spring when it's most needed for irrigation. Rain, on the other hand, runs off immediately into streams and rivers.

"The ideal thing is when you can get snow early and then through the winter," said Keith Baltzor, a rancher near Burns. On sunny winter days, some snow melts and trickles downhill, then refreezes at night. "That makes for a lot longer runoff, where you can count on the river more for irrigation."

Without that frozen storage, Baltzor worries water will come too fast and too early. "If it stays warm and you don't get that snow frozen up there in the hills, it will come off a lot quicker. It will come in a gush."

Using Water Now or Losing It

The high stream flows are forcing land managers to make unusual decisions. Casey Shelman, manager of the Bell-A Ranch, is already diverting water onto fields—something he wouldn't normally do this early.

"We're starting to divert water because it's here, so you got to use it," Shelman said. "They're not ideal conditions to irrigate. We're putting some water out in places that typically we wouldn't be trying to irrigate."

Both Svejcar and Shelman are hopeful that January and February could still bring substantial snow, which would help balance out the water supply for the growing season ahead.

Three Wet Years Provide a Buffer

One bright spot: this is the third above-average precipitation year in a row for the Harney Basin, which means water tables are relatively high coming into this season.

"There are places out in the Silvies floodplain that have surface water right now," Svejcar said. With already-saturated soils, land managers won't need as much water in spring to flood their meadows.

However, continued rain without snowmelt could create a trade-off: better conditions for upland grazing but less ability to spread water across wet meadows, potentially reducing hay production.

"It's hard to say at this point," Svejcar said.

For now, the message is clear: the basin has water, but it's arriving at the wrong time and in the wrong form. Whether late-winter storms can add crucial snowpack will determine how well that water serves the region through the growing season.

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