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TREE FARM BULLETIN

Forester's Log: Snow is Next Year's Trout

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I have a fascination with the white stuff. While most people don't associate New Mexico with deep snow that blankets the ground for months, I live in a part of the state where it does. Nestled in the Rocky Mountains just shy of the Colorado border, the Chama region is a winter playground with breathtaking views that—this time of year—are highlighted in bright white.

Enjoying my fifth winter in Chama, my cross-country skis get lots of trail time. Though there is more snow in my yard here, the snow has been below normal levels since I arrived in 2010. The snow pack is the savings account for next summer's water. In fact, the marina at our neighboring Heron Lake State Park is now totally beached with little hope of seeing water in the near future. Perhaps my friend Ti Piper summed up this concept best when he declared: snow is next year's trout. Sound fishy? Well, Ti is not only passionate about fishing, but he also makes his living teaching, writing, and proselytizing about fish and fishing. Though it may be pretty obvious that fish need water, the rest of us are also quite affected by water shortages.

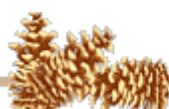


Heron Lake State Park 2010



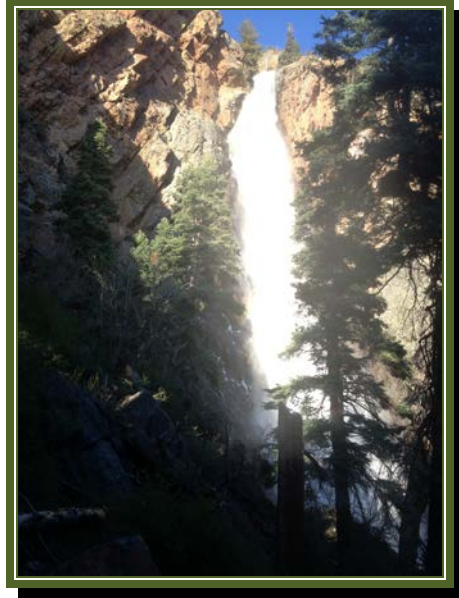
Heron Lake State Park 2014

Snow pack makes up about 50-80% our water supply. Therefore, scientists from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) keep close tabs on snow levels in the western United States. With a network of both manually and automatically measured snow sites, the NRCS has been building the record of snow accumulation and water release since 1935. There are many ways to look at the statistics, and anyone with internet access can find plenty to ponder. For example, in my home river basin, snow pack is 75% of normal for the current water year. (A water year runs from October to September.)



Snow—and the water that will come from it—affect people in many ways. For example, the farmers that produce our food are hoping for lots of snow to fall in the mountains.

Snow pack can also influence next year's fire season. Among natural resource agencies, seasoned fire management officers often have a reference mountain and a reference date. This local wisdom translates, if the snow melts off "fill in the blank" peak, by "fill in the blank" date, we are in for an extremely active fire season. Here in Chama we measure this by a seasonal waterfall that comes from snowmelt. Not only do we track the day El Charro starts to flow, but we pay attention to how many weeks' water cascades down the Brazos Cliffs.



El Charro

Forest management can influence snow pack accumulation as well. When forests are too dense, snow hangs on tree branches and moisture sublimates back into the atmosphere. Meanwhile, moisture is more likely to evaporate from snow packs in the open faster than under the shaded forest canopy. Like other forest values (such as resistance to insects attacks and severe wildland fire behavior) thinned forests offer better snow retention conditions.

Although my reasons are quite different, in the winter, I join the valley school kids- who get more snow days than most of the state- in wishing that it will snow and snow and snow.

FROM THE CHAIRMAN: Please plan on attending our first meeting of 2015 on 11 March. The Forest Stewardship meeting will start at 1000. The Tree Farm Committee meeting will start at 1330. Hope to see some of you there.

The meeting location has been changed from the USDA building on Jefferson Street to the New Mexico BLM Rio Puerco Field Office at 435 Montano Rd. NE, Albuquerque. Future meetings will continue to be held at the USDA building on Jefferson Street in conjunction with the NM Forest Stewardship Committee.

