

Hazard Annex

Winter Storm

Snow hits near-record levels in spots

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**By JAYSON JACOBY
Of the Baker City Herald**

Got a groundhog on your gift list this Groundhog Day? Forget the sunglasses. Spring for a snow shovel instead. The weather-forecasting rodents would need to do a fair piece of digging before they could even start searching for their shadow today in Northeastern Oregon. A parade of January blizzards has pushed the region's mountain snowpack well above average — and even to an all-time record in one place.

That's Dooley Mountain, about 15 miles south of Baker City.

Federal snow surveyors first poked around in Dooley Mountain's powder in 1939. They've returned once a month every winter since, but never in those 67 years did they find more snow on Dooley Mountain than they found on Monday.

The snow surveyors' measuring pole plunged through 46 inches of snow before its sharp tip gouged the ground. That equals a snow-depth record set twice before: on Feb. 29, 1952, and Feb. 26, 1993. And the 46-inch figure doesn't include the remnants of the snowstorm that swept through Tuesday evening, said Travis Bloomer, who works at the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service's Baker City office.

That agency, formerly known as the Soil Conservation Service, tracks snowpacks across the West.

Although Dooley Mountain is the only local snow-survey site that has tied its all-time record for snow depth this winter, the current snowpack at all but one of 18 other sites in the region exceeds the long-term average.

"It's a pleasant surprise to me any time we're over 100 percent anywhere in Baker County," Bloomer said Wednesday. "We hope this will continue."

This winter has surpassed last

But even if storms start bypassing Baker County, this winter, though still short of the halfway point, already has surpassed its predecessor in the snowpack rankings.

At Anthony Lake, for instance, snow surveyors calculated a water content of 19.8 inches on Friday, Bloomer said. Friday was two blizzards ago.



Gordon Wicklander said he keeps trails open to two of his neighbors. This one heads through the back-yard area of his house and then north. He and his wife, Viola, moved to Sumpter six years ago. This winter has produced more snow than he's seen or cares to shovel.

Baker City Herald/S. John Collins

(Water content, not snow depth, is the statistic federal officials rely on to gauge the snowpack. Dooley Mountain's 46-inch snowpack had a water content of 14 inches, the second-highest total ever for that site.)

Last winter the highest water content measured at Anthony Lake was 18.7 inches — and that mark wasn't reached until early May. The water content at Anthony Lake at the end of January 2005 was a meager 9 inches.

The situation is similar throughout Northeastern Oregon.

Each of the 19 survey sites boasts a higher water content today than it did a year ago.

Much higher, in most cases.

Dooley Mountain's 14-inch water content nearly triples the 5.4-inch figure from a year ago.

The discrepancy between this winter and last looks even more dramatic at Eldorado Pass, a snow-survey site along U.S. Highway 26 between Unity and Ironside.

A year ago surveyors measured a mere .8 of an inch of water content at Eldorado Pass, 25 percent of the long-term average.

On Monday — again, before the most recent snowstorm — the water content at Eldorado Pass was 6.9 inches — more than twice the average, and an increase of 862 percent compared with a year ago.

Here's another example of how little this winter has in common with last:

Last year only one of the 19 survey sites had a water content of more than 10 inches at the dawn of February.

Today, 16 of the 19 sites exceed the 10-inch mark (and of the three sites that don't, one is at 9.9 inches).

This could be the year for irrigators

Jim Colton has dreamed about this sort of winter for several years.

Colton manages the Baker Valley Irrigation District. Much of the water that sprinkles crops on about 32,000 acres comes from Phillips Reservoir, the Powder River impoundment in Sumpter Valley, about 16 miles southwest of Baker City.

Phillips hasn't filled, though, for the past five years, a period dominated by drought rather than deluge.

In fact the reservoir has barely exceeded the half-full mark during the dry spell, and farmers and ranchers have settled for less than half the water they're entitled to.

But 2006, Colton hopes, "could be the year."

If the snowpack stays well above average well into spring, then Phillips could reach its bank-full level — 73,500 acre-feet of water — by June, Colton said.

Right now the reservoir holds about 12,700 acre-feet.

"The snowpack looks good now, but we need every bit of that and more," Colton said. "A lot of things could still happen."

A parched February, for instance.

February is, on average, the third-driest month at the Baker City Municipal Airport.

Colton, however, is counting on a soggy spring.

And in this case he'd relish a repeat of 2005, when the spring was much more moist than the winter.

By April it's valley rain, not mountain snow, that most benefits Phillips, Colton said.

When rain dampens farmers' fields, Colton needn't spill much water from the reservoir.

Warming up to the idea of a heated road

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Copper wires buried in the eastbound right lane of I-84 are designed to heat up and help prevent ice from forming on the road when the temperature is below 28 degrees. ODOT officials emphasize that the system is not an alternative to using chains or traction tires.

Baker City Herald/Kathy Orr

**By JAYSON JACOBY
Of the Baker City Herald**

Northeastern Oregon's heated highway froze briefly during its debut this week, like an actor who forgets his lines the instant the curtain rises.

But state transportation officials say the 1.2-mile section of Interstate 84 in Ladd Canyon near La Grande — the only artificially warmed freeway in Eastern Oregon — is prepared now to perform as advertised.

"We're still calibrating some sensors and tweaking the system during this testing phase, but we expect to see some benefit," Tom Strandberg, a spokesman at the Oregon Department of Transportation's regional office in La Grande, said Tuesday.

ODOT spent \$1.1 million earlier this year to bury copper wires in the eastbound right lane of I-84 from the Ladd Creek bridge to near the top of the 6-percent grade. ODOT also installed wires in the left lane of the Ladd Creek bridge.

(The narrow black parallel lines that run along the freeway in that area are made of the rubber-like material that fills the grooves in which the wires were placed.)

Strandberg emphasizes that the wires, which are heated by electricity, aren't capable of keeping the pavement bare during blizzards or when the temperatures plunges below about 24 degrees.

Nor can the wires magically melt snow or ice like the defrosters on the your car's back window.

"People need to understand that this is not an alternative to chaining up, or to driving with caution during the winter," Strandberg said.

What ODOT officials hope the wires will do, however, is help to prevent ice from forming on that one lane, and slow the accumulation of snow, when the weather isn't quite so arctic.

"Obviously the colder it is the less effective the system will be," Strandberg said. "It's just another tool to help keep the road safer and open more often than in the past."

ODOT has been testing the road-warming wires this fall, in preparation for the season's first snowstorm, he said.

When snowflakes started to fall on Monday, the system was supposed to start supplying power to the buried wires when the road surface temperature dropped to 28 degrees and there was moisture, Strandberg said.

But apparently the temperature sensors connected to the system's switch were reading a higher temperature even when other sensors showed 28, he said.

ODOT workers are inspecting and recalibrating all the sensors to ensure they're accurately measuring the road temperature, Strandberg said.

Initially, ODOT will set the sensors to heat the wires beginning at 28 degrees, and to turn off the electricity at 24 degrees, he said.

Below 24 degrees the warming wires no longer make much of a difference, Strandberg said.

He said ODOT officials might tinker with those temperature settings once they've watched how the system performs during an actual storm.

Strandberg said officials also can manually operate the wires, so if a storm is forecast, they can "pre-heat" the pavement and, they hope, prevent snow from piling up as rapidly as it would on unheated lanes.

The wires should also work well with ODOT's other main ice-fighter: liquid magnesium-chloride, which trucks spray on the freeway to inhibit ice from forming and snow from sticking.

If the wires warm the freeway by just a few degrees, the magnesium-chloride could remain effective for longer than it does on the chillier lanes.

ODOT officials picked Ladd Canyon as a test site for road-warming system in part because vehicles crash there more often in winter than most places in Oregon.

Between 1998 and 2002, police responded to an average of 31 wrecks per year on the nine-mile section of freeway that includes Ladd Canyon — four times higher than the statewide average for rural freeways.

Ladd Canyon's crash rate even exceeds that on Cabbage Hill, the notorious grade on Interstate 84 about 50 miles northwest, near Pendleton.

Snow Kidding Around

Published: December 29, 2003



Baker City's Main Street was a winter wonderland Monday morning.

Baker City Herald/S. John Collins

**By JAYSON JACOBY,
LISA BRITTON
And CHRIS COLLINS**

Of the Baker City Herald

Baker County's snowplows won't gather any dust or rust this winter.

The snowiest storm in more than a decade slammed a powdery fist into the county Saturday night, and by Monday morning the blizzard had yet to loosen its icy grip. City, county and state officials summoned every available plow to scrape from streets, roads and highways a layer of snow that exceeded one foot in many places.

"We've got every piece of equipment we have out working," Tom Fisk, Baker City's street supervisor, said this morning.

The story is identical at the Baker County Road Department.

"Everybody is out," said Kathy Hogge, who works for the department. "They've got the nose to the grindstone, or the snowplow, or whatever. They're busy trying to get things taken care of as soon as possible."

Fisk said he called in six employees — two who were on vacation — to start plowing streets Sunday.

Two other workers transferred temporarily from other departments to snow patrol, he said.

The day crew worked until about 8 o'clock Sunday night, and a fresh crew came on at midnight, Fisk said.

He expects to follow a similar schedule today.

Oregon Department of Transportation crews also worked around the clock to combat snow that occasionally closed the eastbound and westbound lanes of Interstate 84 Sunday, said ODOT spokesman Tom Strandberg.

"There weren't any major closures, just sporadic ones," he said.

Both sides of the freeway were open by this morning.

The freeway eastbound was closed from noon on Sunday to 1 a.m. this morning, and westbound lanes were temporarily closed throughout the day from noon to early this morning, he said.

"Basically vehicles were spinning out and blocking the road," Strandberg said.

Twenty-five new inches of snow fell on Ladd Canyon over the weekend, he said, and 19 inches accumulated on Meacham.

During one of those freeway closures, between Baker City and Durkee, bored motorists managed to lend some artistic levity to the situation by assembling a cast of sagebrush-armed snowmen in the highway median.

Cindy Ratterman of Baker City was among the travelers who appreciated the display. Ratterman said she and her husband, Ned, and son, Brandon, were returning to Baker City from visiting relatives in Wyoming when the freeway was closed about 3:30 Sunday afternoon.

The freeway re-opened about 90 minutes later, and Cindy Ratterman said the snowmen brightened the final leg of their journey.

"They were awfully cute," she said. "They made everyone smile after being stranded for an hour and a half."

Ratterman said she didn't see any of the snow sculptors at work.

But she has suspects.

"I'm guessing kids got really bored in the car, and their parents said 'go out and build a snowman,'" she said.

Traffic was clogged on Bridge Street at Lew Bros. Les Schwab Tire Service this morning while travelers waited their turn for chains.

"There's a line that winds through the building and cars are lined up on both sides all the way down to the corner on both sides," said Diana Brown.

Advisories recommended that motorists traveling through the Baker City area this morning carry chains or traction tires. Chains were required for all trucks traveling east and west at Ladd Canyon and Cabbage Hill.

City hardly plowed at all last winter

Regardless of what happens the rest of the season, this winter already has been busier than last for city crews, Fisk said.

Last winter the city's plows languished in their garages, getting out for just a few hours of exercise after a minor storm in early February.

The city spent \$18,000 to plow snow and to spread sand and ice on streets — less than half its annual budget of about \$46,000.

Two winters ago, by contrast, the city spent \$71,000.

As long as the snow continues, crews will concentrate on clearing the busiest streets, Fisk said.

After the flakes cease to fall so thickly, the city's plows will move into residential neighborhoods.

Fisk reminds residents that crews can't spare the time to clear everyone's driveway once the plow has passed.

However, Community Connection of Baker County and the Powder River Correctional Facility help low-income senior citizens and disabled residents keep their sidewalks and driveways clear of snow.

People who can't wield a shovel, and can't afford to pay someone to do the job, should call Community Connection at 523-6591. Community Connection maintains a list of people who need help.

Powder River officials then dispatch inmates to shovel snow — and they bring their own shovels.

Forty inmates were shoveling this morning, "trying to get people out of their houses," said Mary Calloway, work program coordinator at the minimum-security prison.

A city ordinance requires property owners to shovel sidewalks within 24 hours after a storm ends.

Fisk said that although he understands that in certain places — Main Street downtown, for example — there's no place to shovel snow except into the street, he would appreciate if residents elsewhere avoid the practice.

This morning city crews had to plow snow that had been pushed from driveways and parking lots into the street, Fisk said.

"That doesn't help," he said.

Fisk said city workers will continue the traditional practice of plowing snow into berms in the centers of several streets, including Main, Resort and Campbell.

But if those berms grow to SUV hood height, as they did two years ago, the city might load some of that snow into trucks and haul it away, he said.

Storm left hundreds without power

Heavy snow loading on power lines in the Sumpter-Granite and North Powder-Anthony Lakes areas left nearly 1,500 homes without power early this morning in separate outages.

Service to 553 customers at North Powder, Anthony Lakes and the surrounding rural area was disrupted from 1:25 a.m. to 2:50 a.m. today, said Steve Schauer, Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative members services manager.

The system was not damaged in the outages, he said. The service disruptions were the result of bouncing lines that made contact as snow loads fell from them, causing a breaker or fuse to open, he said.

The same situation occurred on the Sumpter-Granite line, which serves 924 customers. Service went down at 5:45 a.m. today, and was restored to most homes by 7:45 a.m., Schauer said. The balance was back on line by 8:15 a.m.

Lights flickered throughout the Baker service area Sunday night also because of the heavy snow falling off the lines. The force was not enough to open a breaker or fuse in those cases, Schauer said.

STORM DAMAGE

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WEATHER RETURNS TO NORMAL - FOR NOW

By The Observer

Life was almost back to late-November normal today in the Grande Ronde Valley after a couple of days of snow and high winds that snarled traffic, blew down trees and damaged roofs.

Highway 204 from Elgin to Tollgate has reopened, but oversize vehicles are prohibited because of road conditions. Packed snow is reported on most highways and all require motorists to carry chains or traction devices.

The calm may not last long. The National Weather Bureau today predicted high winds on Saturday, with a 40 percent chance of snow or rain showers. The winds through Ladd Canyon are again expected to gust as high as 55 mph.

Rain and snow showers are predicted to continue each day through a good part of next week.

ODOT OFFERS WINTER SURVIVAL, DRIVING TIPS ON WEB SITE

The Oregon Department of Transportation has updated its Internet "Winter Survival Travel Kit."

The Web site provides news and tips for helping the public travel Oregon's roads and highways safely during the winter months.

The site can be accessed at www.odot.state.or.us. click on News Media Center and then Winter Travel Kit.

It offers basic winter driving tips, how ODOT can help and where Snopark permits are required.



STORM DAMAGE: Dustin Anderson of Cove works on removing metal roofing from the Ascension School in Cove Thursday afternoon. The school lost 1,500 square feet of its roof and electrical service during Wednesday's storm.

The Observer/KELLY WARD

WALLOWA COUNTY READY FOR STORMS

Published: September 18, 2002

By Gary Fletcher

Observer Staff Writer

ENTERPRISE — Wallowa County is Oregon's first "StormReady" county.

In a ceremony Tuesday at the courthouse, Wallowa County Commission Chairman Mike Hayward and Commissioner Darrell McFetridge accepted certificates, plaques and road signs from officials of the National Weather Service.

A separate certificate honored Matthew Marmor, the county's emergency services director. Under Marmor's leadership Wallowa County joined more than 400 communities nationwide that became part of StormReady.

StormReady is a national program that helps local emergency management officials prepare their counties to be ready for severe weather threats.

"If a dangerous storm is headed for the area, the people who live, work or vacation in Wallowa County will be more knowledgeable and be better prepared to handle these situations," said Bruce Bauck, meteorologist in charge at the National Weather Service's office in Pendleton.

"A partnership of all levels of the community has contributed to this process," Bauck said. Among the 20 people in the audience hearing Bauck's remarks were volunteer weather observers and spotters.

Thanks to the efforts of Wallowa County Emergency Management, schools, municipalities, amateur radio, weather spotters and law enforcement, "We have furthered our agency's mission to continue to educate citizens on how they can help protect their lives and property from the potential effects of Mother Nature's fury," Bauck said.

Weather radios are strategically placed in city offices, schools, the hospital and at Wallowa Lake State Park. They broadcast forecasts and weather observations and sound an alarm in the event of a severe weather alert. Weather radios can be purchased at various electronic stores.

As examples of Wallowa County's weather preparedness, the weather station at the Wallowa School has real-time weather data on the Internet. Volunteer weather observer Scott Hampton of Joseph has an automated weather station and the Web site www.firegone.com.

"Just click on 'Local Joseph Weather,' " Hampton said. Automatic e-mails of weather warnings can be requested from the site.

"From big cities to small towns, StormReady guidelines prepare communities with an action plan that responds to the threat of all types of severe weather," Bauck said.

"Wallowa County has established a way to better protect citizens from severe weather threats." StormReady is a voluntary preparedness program that establishes guidelines for communities to follow. Counties adopt requirements in the areas of communications, warning reception and dissemination, public outreach, awareness and administrative planning.

"Preparedness and advance warning are vital factors in severe weather situations," said Dennis Hull, NWS warning coordination meteorologist in Pendleton. Citizens in mountainous counties that are prone to flash floods and winter storms must understand the importance of keeping safe in severe weather, he said.

The National Weather Service operates the most advanced weather and flood warning and forecast system in the world.

Each forecast office posts daily forecasts and severe weather warnings on its Web pages.

Links to NWS offices across the country are available through <http://weather.gov>.