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Drought plagues snowmaking at Arapahoe Basin, Keystone

Dave Buchanan

Nov 28, 2012



Colorado's ski resorts use millions of gallons of water each year in their snowmaking efforts. With many rivers and reservoirs running low, some resorts already are feeling a pinch in their water supplies.

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Two Summit County ski resorts are among the first to feel the pinch of last year's drought.

Both Arapahoe Basin and Keystone have been forced to cut back their snowmaking operations due to water shortages in the Snake River.

According to the Summit Daily News, A-Basin has modified its snowmaking efforts to offset low flows in the North Fork of the Snake River, where the resort's snowmaking water originates.

Alan Henceroth, chief operating officer for A-Basin, said the resort is making as much snow as stream flows allow.

"We're working around the low levels and we're still making it work," Henceroth said, adding the resort is preparing to open new terrain.

Henceroth said the resort has sufficient water rights but is required to maintain a minimum stream flow.

Earlier this week stream flow readings available online showed the Snake River dropped for several hours on Nov. 11-12 to a flow of less than six cubic feet per second, the minimum required under state regulations.

Bob Berwyn, writing Nov. 16 in the online Summit County Citizen's Voice, reported that even during last winter's abundant snowfall, Keystone's snowmaking diversions caused the Snake River to drop below the required minimum stream flow between 15 and 20 times, according to officials with the Colorado Water Conservation Board.

"We're aware of the situation at Keystone," said Linda Bassi, section chief of the CWCB's Stream and Lake Protection Program. "We've talked about it with them in the past, and we're asking them to refine their timing ... It's kind of a complicated situation."

Keystone also has the capability of drawing the Snake River down to two cfs if they invoke skier safety concerns and get special permission from the U.S. Forest Service.

Such flows, however, severely impact the river's trout population, said Colorado Parks and Wildlife aquatic biologist Jon Ewert, who monitors the trout population in the river on a regular basis.

"If they go below 2 cfs, any over-winter survival we get is a bonus," Ewert said. Ewert said the native brook trout can survive in meager flows but at some point, the pockets of habitat freeze up if flows drop too low.

Keystone has an agreement with the state wildlife agency to mitigate impacts to the fishery by stocking catchable size rainbow trout, "which helps create the illusion of a fishery, but is a far cry from a self-sustaining trout population," Berwyn wrote.

As of Nov. 26, the snowpack statewide was at 44 percent of average, with Western Slope basins ranging from 40-47 percent of average.