



Frequently Asked Questions About Idaho's Drought

Brought to you courtesy of Idaho Rural Water Association

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Question: Idaho has had an unusually wet spring. Why do I still hear people say that Idaho is in a drought?

Answer: This is a multi-dimensional issue. The first reason Idaho is still considered to be in drought conditions is that we are playing catch-up from last year. Idaho's reservoirs had a large deficit in water storage after last year's extreme drought, which KTVB7 reported as the driest spring and summer Idaho saw in 96 years. By October 1, 2021, 91% of the state was "under severe drought conditions or worse."¹ So when irrigation season came this year, water storage volume was still "behind" what is needed for a "normal" season. Think of it like a bank account that needs to have a balance of \$100.00. If your account has a current balance of \$-75.00, and you deposit a check of \$100, you will still only have a balance of \$25.00. This is analogous to how reservoir storage works.

The second problem contributing to water shortages in 2022 is the timing of the rain we received. When there is a precipitation event in the winter, the ground is already saturated with water. Precipitation in the lowlands runs off the ground and into storage reservoirs or rivers. In the mountains, precipitation contributes to snowpack that will be saved until the spring melt. Conversely, when weather warms up in the spring, the ground is no longer saturated in the mountains or in the lowlands. If there is a precipitation event, water will trickle down into the soil and join groundwater sources. This is called infiltration. Some precipitation will make it to our storage reservoirs, but not all. That is what happened this spring with all the rain we received.

Question: Is Idaho still in a drought?

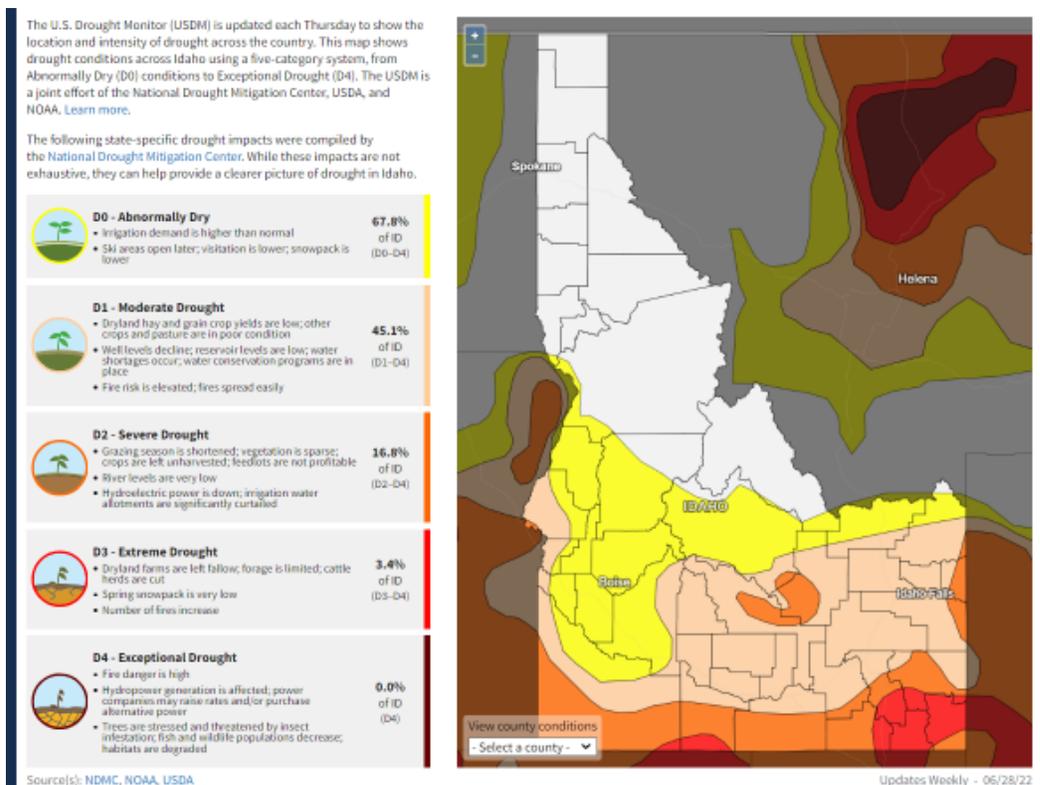
Answer: Yes, but fortunately the drought conditions are not as severe as experts reported in early spring. Southern Idaho has had an unusually wet spring due to La Nina conditions in the Pacific. This has helped make up some of the water storage shortages. As of July 4, 2022, the U.S. Drought Monitor reports that 67.8% of Idaho is experiencing "Abnormally Dry" conditions. The Abnormally Dry rating is the mildest on the spectrum; it indicates irrigation demand is higher than normal. 45% of Idaho is now experiencing "Moderate Drought." This means certain crop yields might be low or in poor conditions, well and reservoir levels are low, some water shortages occur, and water conservation programs are in place. Now only 16.8% of Idaho is experiencing "Severe Drought," as opposed to 67% reported in April 2022. Visit drought.gov/states/idaho to view drought conditions, which are updated each Thursday. As of the writing of this article, 29 counties have USDA disaster designations.² See the following page for an image depicting statewide conditions.

Question: How long will I have irrigation water this summer?

Answer: The water outlook is considerably improved over early spring predictions. On June 16, 2022 KTVB7 interviewed Mike Meyers, Water Master for Water District 63. Water District 63 administers irrigation for customers living in the Boise area and obtaining water from Lucky Peak Reservoir. Mr. Meyers expressed optimism for irrigation sources lasting into September, thanks to a wet spring. However, he also stressed that typically one wet season isn't enough to recover from a drought year. Idaho has been in fairly dry conditions for several years now, so it will take more than one irrigation season to recover. Mr. Meyers cautioned that water conservation for all users is still important, and the length of irrigation season will ultimately depend on decisions by individual canal companies and districts.³

In the Boise-Payette region, Cascade, Deadwood, Mann Creek, Deadwood, Arrowrock, Anderson Ranch, and Lucky Peak are all over 80% full. These are the primary reservoirs serving southwest Idaho. In eastern and central Idaho, most smaller reservoirs have reached over 90% capacity, including Little Wood, Island Park, Lake Walcott, Henry's Lake, and Grassy Lake.⁴

However, not all of Idaho is enjoying wetter conditions. The Upper Snake system above American Falls Dam is only 58% full, and well below normal at 76% of average storage on June 1. There is -817.3 thousand acre-feet less water currently in the system compared to this time last year.⁵



Visit drought.gov anytime to view current drought conditions in Idaho.²

Sources

1. Eggers, Bri. “How will Idaho recover from a record-breaking drought season?” KTVB7 online newspaper, November 21, 2021. www.ktvb.com.
2. “Current U.S. Drought Monitor Conditions for Idaho”, *National Integrated Drought Information System*, June 20, 2022, www.drought.gov/states/idaho.
3. Banks Rusby, Erin. “Reservoirs full, more water being released thanks to spring rains”. KTVB7 online newspaper, June 16, 2022. www.ktvb.com.
4. “Hydromet – Reservoir Storage “Teacup” Diagrams”, Bureau of Reclamation, July 3, 2022, <https://www.usbr.gov/pn/hydromet.html>.
5. Wilson, Braydon. “NRCS Idaho releases June 2022 Water Supply Outlook Report”. Local 8 News online newspaper, June 7, 2022. <https://localnews8.com/news/idaho/2022/06/07/nrcs-idaho-releases-june-2022-water-supply-outlook-report/>.