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B.C. VIEWS: Another dry summer to ponder



A forest fire depicted by artist Carol Christianson in a mural to mark B.C.'s 150th anniversary.

Black Press

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VICTORIA – Spring runoff is underway with the onset of warm weather across the vast snowpack at B.C.'s higher elevations, and the annual swelling of the river systems has begun.

May tends to be the low-water point as snow stops falling and starts to melt, but this year things are ahead of schedule. A mild winter dominated by the El Nino current in the Pacific has the province bracing for what could be another dry summer.

The B.C. government has started working on a drought response plan for this year, after the Environment Ministry's latest survey confirmed snowpack is lower than normal –

everywhere except northern Vancouver Island and the adjacent coastal mountains. It was declining in April and much of it melted between January and March, in a winter that featured snow being trucked south to keep Cypress Bowl operational for the Olympic Games.

The Skeena and Nass basins had 81 per cent of normal snowpack a month ago, but that had already shrunk to 61 per cent by May 1. It's worse in the Southern Interior, with the Nicola, Okanagan, Kettle and Kootenay systems at 75 per cent of normal or lower, and only 37 per cent of normal snow in the Similkameen basin.

Many people will likely feel the effects of forest fires, water restrictions and drought in ranch country. Less noticeable is the effect on B.C.'s hydroelectric system.

According to B.C. Hydro, the fiscal year just ended was another year of net power imports, with 4,600 gigawatt-hours purchased. That makes nine years out of the last 10 when there were net imports, and this year it appears we will again rely on power from Alberta or the U.S.

Both of those are primarily coal sources. The Pacific Northwest is one of a few U.S. regions with substantial hydro assets, notably 31 dams on the Columbia River system run by a federal agency called the Bonneville Power Administration.

"Spring snow too little, too late," says the administration's latest news bulletin. "BPA warns electricity rates could rise."

The problem here is also snowpack, which the BPA reckons is the fifth lowest since its dams were begun in 1929. B.C. Hydro's forecast is a bit rosier, expecting 2010 to be the 12th lowest in the past 51 years.

B.C. Hydro's forecast is brighter in part because the Peace River system, which is less affected by Pacific weather, has 80 to 90 per cent of normal snowpack.

This is the backdrop for the debate about proceeding with the Site C dam on the Peace, which the B.C. government intends to be its last big dam. Its capacity would increase the ability of B.C. Hydro to manage a range of intermittent sources, from wind farms to waste wood to run-of-river power.

This is proposed to provide enough power for B.C.'s winter peak and to sell power south, where demand peaks in summer.

And of course, there is the unique engineering opportunity where Site C would produce a third as much electricity as the W.A.C. Bennett Dam with a reservoir one 20th the size.

Is there a long-term trend toward warmer, drier weather in B.C.? Pine and spruce beetle outbreaks across the Interior certainly suggests that there is, and so does the northward shift of cedar growth along the coast.

What about the increasingly acrimonious debate about greenhouse gas emissions, and their implications for the cost of fossil fuel power? With or without carbon-trading schemes, North America is looking for cleaner energy and billions are still being bet on electric vehicles.

It's something to ponder this hot summer.

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