

Drought

This winter has been anything but a typical Utah winter. The lack of precipitation and snow has become increasingly apparent across the valley. It is always telling when an entire season passes with little concern about snowy commutes or icy roads. Unfortunately, the continued absence of snow is also a warning sign that we may be heading into a difficult year when it comes to drought conditions.

October of 2025 provided a promising start, with above-average precipitation for the month. However, nearly all of that moisture came in the form of rain rather than snow. November and December followed with unusually warm and dry conditions, with precipitation totals well below the long-term averages of 1.12 inches in November and 1.27 inches in December. As of mid-January 2026, only about 0.38 inches of precipitation has been recorded, compared to the average of 1.04 inches for the month. These figures reflect rainfall in the valley and do not account for the lack of snowpack accumulating in the surrounding mountains, which is often even more concerning.

For agricultural producers, drought and low moisture levels can have wide-reaching impacts beyond what many people initially think about. One such impact is the effect on grazing permits for cattle on public lands. Many local beef producers rely on summer grazing permits to help feed their cattle. During drought years, government agencies often reduce the number of livestock allowed on these permits due to limited forage availability. As a result, ranchers may be forced to secure additional feed sources or reduce herd sizes by selling cattle earlier than planned.

Another consequence of drought is increased hay prices, and this issue is often tied directly to reduced grazing permits. When producers are unable to run as many cattle on summer permits, they frequently must purchase additional hay to make up for the lost forage. This increased demand removes hay from an already limited supply. At the same time, drought conditions can reduce grass and alfalfa hay yields, further tightening availability. With less hay available and more producers needing to buy it, prices tend to rise. These higher feed costs can place significant financial strain on livestock producers, who already operate on narrow margins.

While these challenges are concerning, there is still reason for cautious optimism. Winter is not yet over, and there is still time for additional precipitation to arrive. In some past years, low winter moisture has been followed by a wet spring that helped ease drought conditions. While only time will tell what this year brings, it is important to remain aware of the potential impacts and be prepared for another dry year. Unfortunately, drought has become an all-too-common reality in our area, making thoughtful planning and efficient use of resources more important than ever.