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Rainy summer an unanticipated blessing for Taos County rafters, irrigators

By J.R. Logan

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Rafting company owner Steve Miller was turning away guests this spring when forecasters were predicting another brutally dry summer for 2014. Snowpack levels were meager, and there was little hope of relief from a years-long drought.

Instead, the season has been abnormally wet, filling rivers and acequias, and giving anyone like Miller who relies on water for his livelihood a reason to celebrate.

"It took us all by surprise, and happily so," Miller said Wednesday (July 16). "This year has taught us never to say 'no.'" For the last several years, Miller and other area raft guides have bemoaned the lack of water in the R'o Grande, which makes it impossible for them to run the iconic Taos Box section of the gorge. For these companies, the Box is a big part of their business, and without it, they've been struggling to stay afloat.

This year hasn't been a banner one, but it was better than nothing, Miller said. Rains at the end of May in Colorado meant more water in the R'o Grande, allowing Miller and other outfitters to run the Box. Miller did trips from late May through the end of June. He managed to book 85 guests in June, and even took a ride down the river himself.

"It helps with morale," Miller said of the unexpected streamflows. "It makes you a lot more interested in being in the business."

Taos County Extension Agent Tony Valdéz said Wednesday irrigators have also been pleasantly surprised with the relative abundance of water so far this summer. "Some of these acequias are seeing more water than they've seen in years," Valdéz said. "They're happy."

The monsoons that started in July are continuing to buoy river levels. While the Box season appears to be over, streamflow gauges on the R'o Grande Wednesday showed the river running above the long-term mean for this time of year.

Data from more than a dozen weather observers show Taos County has received an average of 1.2 inches of rain in the last two weeks. According to the National Weather Service, Taos County usually gets up to 1 inch of rain in the first half of July. Taos County gets an average of 6.7 inches of rain between June and August, according to the agency.

The largest amount of rainfall this month — 2.24 inches — was reported at Valle Escondido up Taos Canyon.

Another observation site near the Taos Country Club reported about 1 inch of rain in the same period.

July has seen a steady bout of monsoon thunderstorms, though the pattern has brought cooler-than-average temperatures for mid-summer. New Mexico typically sees monsoons that originate from the south that bring warm moisture and temperatures. But Jennifer Palucki, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Albuquerque told *The Taos News* the moisture from this year's monsoons is coming from "backdoor fronts" that come from east to west instead of south to north.

According to the Weather Service, parts of far eastern Taos County saw more than 10 inches of precipitation between October 2013 and May 2014 — nearly twice the average. Other parts of the county were between 80 and 120 percent of normal.

That rain has been a blessing for those expecting another very dry summer, though the increasing rainfall still hasn't been enough to pull the county or the state out of a deep, multiyear drought. Palucki noted that most of the state is still "several inches behind" normal.

The U.S. Drought monitor published July 8 shows most of Taos County is still considered to be in "severe drought." However conditions now are better than they were a year ago, when most of the state (including Taos County) was under either "extreme" or "exceptional" drought.

While the monsoon is expected to wane in the next week, the long-term forecast is for the drought to continue to subside in the area.