

# Washington and Oregon 2020-2021 Winter Snowpack Outlook

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Issued November 10, 2020

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**Update: The April 1 snowpack forecast for Washington and Oregon verified very well. Washington recorded a statewide average of 129% of median while Oregon had 109%. Both states were only about 10% off the 120% forecast issued on November 10, 2020.**

The mountain winter snowpack is critically important not only to the general public, but also to special interest groups, as it determines irrigation water for agriculture, river flow for power generation, and winter and summer recreation. The winter snowpack is also a significant factor in the severity of summer fire seasons due to drought and its affect on live and large dead fuel moisture.

Weather Research and Consulting Services, LLC has developed a set of algorithms based upon correlations between the mid-winter El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) 3.4 region sea surface temperature (SST) anomaly, the average winter (November–March) 500hPa height over Washington and Oregon, and the April 1 Snow Water Equivalent (SWE) percentage compared to the median. Forty years of data (1981-2020) were used to develop these algorithms. The source of both the ENSO 3.4 region SST anomaly and 500 hPa data is from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The April 1 SWE data is from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) SNOTEL station network.

The primary predictor for this early outlook is the three-month DJF (Dec Jan Feb) forecast ENSO 3.4 region SST anomaly. We use a composite of twenty-four international dynamic and statistical ENSO models as displayed at the International Research Institute for Climate and Society (IRI) website. The forecast ENSO 3.4 region SST anomaly is then used to predict both the average wintertime 500 hPa height over Washington and Oregon and the April 1 SWE percentages for both states. The forecast winter-time 500 hPa height value is also used to calculate a second value for the April 1 SWE. These two April 1 SWE values are then averaged to produce our final forecast value. This method uses five algorithms to predict the Washington and Oregon April 1 SWE compared to the climatological median.

The Climate Prediction Center (CPC) is predicting a moderate to strong La Niña this winter. The projected IRI/CPC ENSO 3.4 region SST anomaly for the mid-winter months of DJF is -1.1 degrees Celsius. Using this value as input for our set of algorithms, the following is our prediction for the 2021 Washington and Oregon snowpack.

Washington: 120% (+/- 20%) of median

Oregon: 120% (+/- 20%) of median

Figures 1 and 2 display these forecasts in relation to the 1981-2020 historical values for both states.

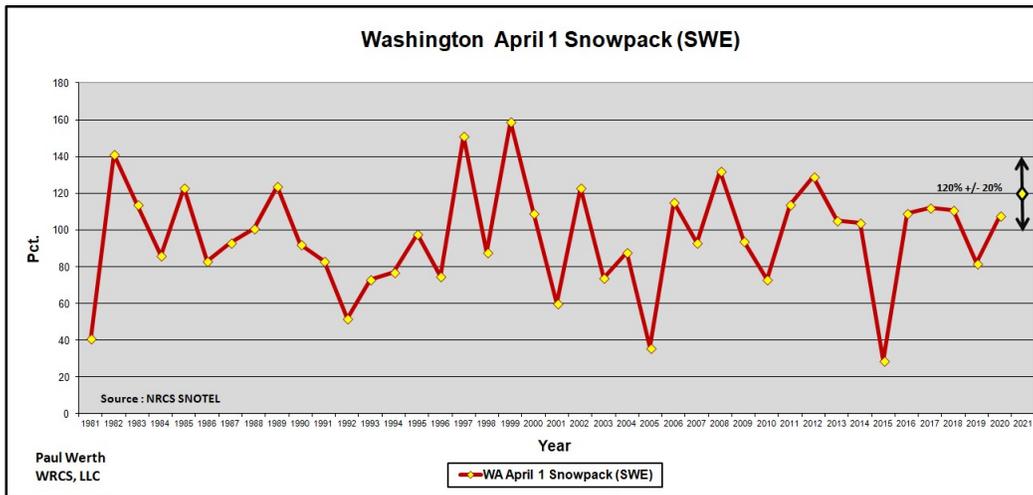


Figure 1. Washington April 1 SWE 1981-2020 and predicted 2021.

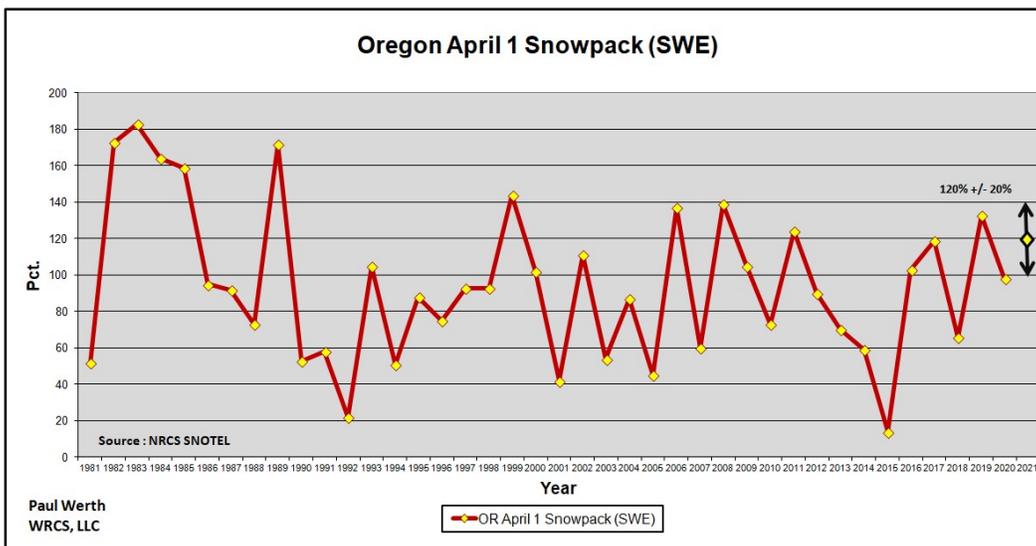


Figure 2. Oregon April 1 SWE 1981-2020 and predicted 2021.

A moderate to strong La Niña is predicted for this winter. Based upon this forecast, our research indicates there is a high probability that Washington and Oregon will experience a colder and wetter than normal winter. The 2020-2021 snowpack in both states will likely be above average, 120% (+/- 20%) of the median. This means there should be ample snow for winter recreation. Many ski resorts could open as early as the Thanksgiving holiday. There will likely be plenty of water for summer irrigation and electric power generation. Drought conditions are unlikely, thus the 2021 summer fire season should be mild with most large fires confined to the rangelands of eastern Washington and eastern Oregon.

Updates to this outlook will be included in our Snowpack Tracker Reports which are issued every two weeks beginning January 1, 2021.

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