



Are we prepared for extreme weather?

A few months ago, I was scrolling through the local news, when I happened upon a headline that stopped me cold. Morden it seemed, was short on water. In fact this small southern Manitoba town of some 10,000 souls was in the middle of a severe drought.

And that drought wasn't happening in the hottest months of summer - it was happening in February.

Which made me feel more than a little climate queasy, so I decided to take a look at where Winnipeg stood on the water scale and discovered that Agriculture Canada actually maps drought conditions across the country, including Manitoba.

Those maps didn't paint a rosy picture.

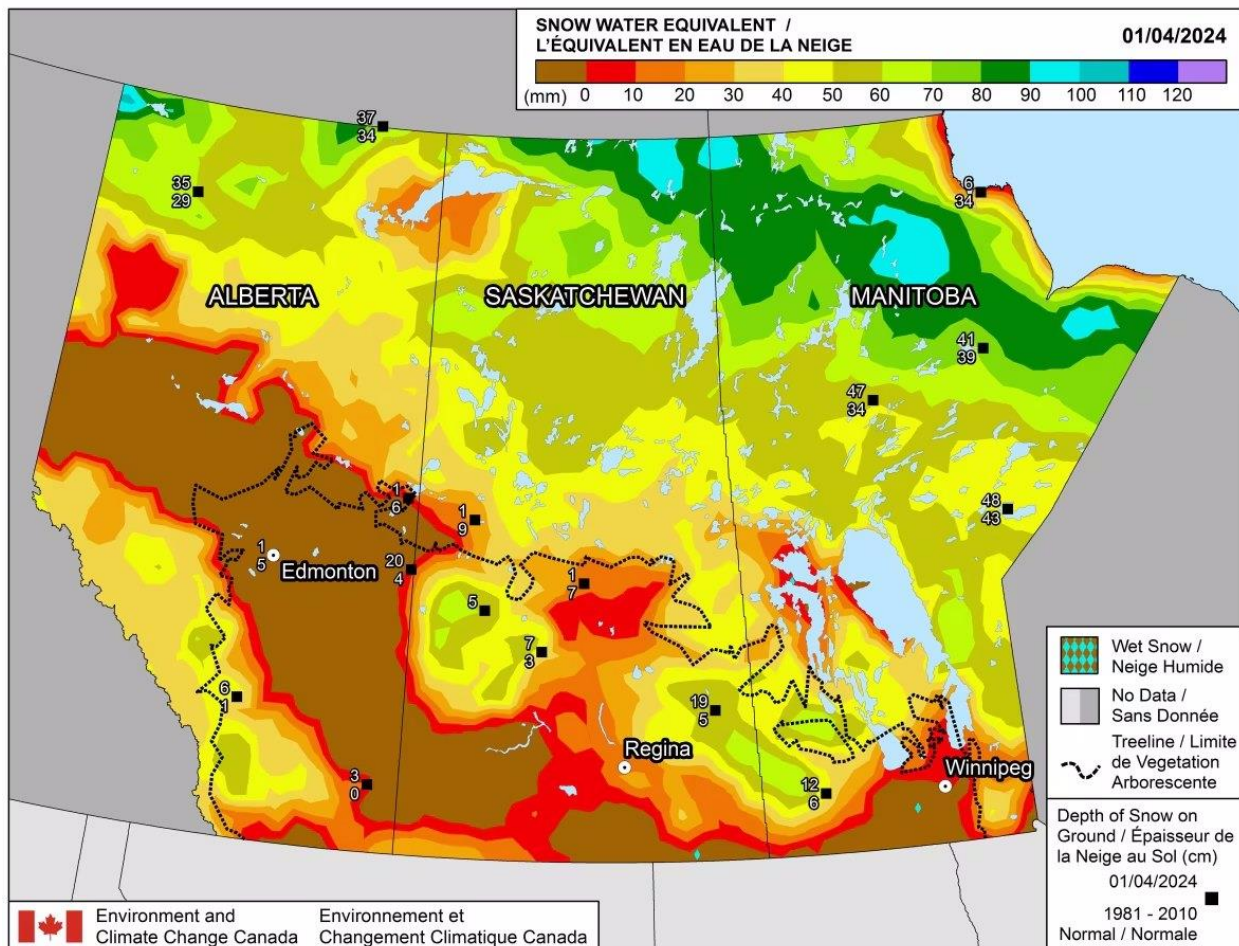
As of January, Winnipeg was already experiencing "Abnormally Dry" conditions, while regions to the west, north and south were registering moderate to severe drought. Admittedly, not as bad as Alberta, Saskatchewan or even BC where significant areas were already in the midst of

extreme or exceptional droughts. But bad enough to hope that our civic and provincial governments were prepared and ready to take action should the situation worsen.

I then decided to take a look at flood predictions for 2024 and discovered – if you can believe it – that in early January, the Red River suddenly rose by 5 feet due to high precipitation south of the border. Thankfully the river remained within its banks, but a cresting river in one of the coldest months of the year is not a normal event. In fact, river depth tends to remain relatively constant in the drier months of winter.

Suddenly all those warm winter days I'd enjoyed started to feel a little less enjoyable.

It's a feeling that was amplified when I scanned the April 9th snow water data released by Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECC). Based on the lack of snowpack this winter, it seems we've shifted from abnormally dry to the very dry range this spring. In fact zero to 10mm of snowpack – symbolized on an ECC map as a brown band – currently extends from Winnipeg, west through southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan, north to Edmonton and across much of Northern BC.



So, without heavy spring rain, it will be tough, if not impossible, to avoid yet another serious drought. And that's not just bad news for farmers. It's bad news for city dwellers as well because lack of snow melt doesn't just impact crops. Manitoba Hydro may once again be expanding its debt by buying electricity to make up for diminished production from its own dams.

Not to mention the fact that reduced snowpack and an early melt, combined with high spring temps and high evaporation rates, also means a potentially prolonged fire season. We were lucky last year compared to other provinces when it came to wildfires. But this year? – who knows.

Alberta, which experienced a whopping 1088 wildfires in 2023 and as of early February 2024 still had 57 fires burning, has already set up a Drought Command Team in anticipation of another dry spring and summer.

That command team, led by Alberta Environment and Protected Areas, includes experts from Agriculture, Municipal Affairs, Public Safety and Emergency Services, and connects with other key players. The team's mandate is to monitor snowpack, rainfall, river levels and water use throughout the province to try and understand how much water will be available this year and to negotiate water sharing agreements to protect those areas most impacted by drought.

So, what is Manitoba doing? Well, despite a "water strategy" and "action plan" developed by the previous government, we don't seem to be doing much of anything. There's certainly no Manitoba drought command team, and as far as I can see the province's Drought Monitor website hasn't even been updated.

Now, one might argue that setting up a drought command team here would be premature – after all it may rain nonstop from May through June to compensate for the lack of snow melt. But if it doesn't this province, just like the town of Morden, will be left scrambling to figure out how to cope with drought impacts – from potential water shortages to wildfires.

That's bad enough, but in the bigger picture, a lack of preparedness for extreme weather phenomenon, like drought, is a symptom of a dangerous kind of denial – a wish and a prayer that severe climate impacts will happen elsewhere, not here.

Well, the truth is those impacts are already being felt, and if the provincial government doesn't get its act together fast and improve Manitoba's overall climate resiliency – its ability to cope with everything from floods and droughts to wildfires and extreme storms – we're all going to be left wondering why we didn't invest in our future when we still had the chance.

