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# THE Durango HERALD

Weekend Edition

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No positive spin on this winter as Silverton leaders look to adapt



JERRY MCBRIDE/Durango Herald photos

**Water already set to be reined in**  
Durango officials prepare for 'grim' drought outlook

BY JESSICA BOWMAN  
HERALD STAFF WRITER

After one of the warmest winters on record and a severely below-average snowpack, Southwest Colorado is heading into spring with a troubling water outlook.

"The outlook for this year is grim," said Ken Beck, superintendent of Pine River Irrigation District

Although fall flooding helped fill Vallecito Reservoir to near capacity, Beck said the combination of extreme heat and a historically weak winter will likely offset those gains.

"This has been the warmest winter in 131 years," he said, adding that the district's hydrologist told him, "It isn't just breaking records – it's shattering them."

While the reservoir is only a few feet from full, that storage may not last long without consistent inflows from snowmelt.

"There's not enough in that reservoir to provide all of the irrigation needs without some sort of precipitation through the year," Beck said.

If hot, dry conditions persist, the district may not have enough water to last through September, he warned.

The U.S. Drought Monitor classified most of Southwest Colorado in moderate, Stage 1 drought as of March 19, with portions of La Plata and Archuleta

## Too thin for a silver lining



ABOVE: Tourists walk past the Coffee Bear in Silverton on March 12. TOP: During a typical winter, snow would cover Silverton and the surrounding mountains, but on March 12, there was none to be seen in town and only sparse coverings on the peaks.

BY JESSICA BOWMAN  
HERALD STAFF WRITER

SILVERTON – At 9,300 feet, with a single road in and out and a tourism-reliant economy, winters have never been Silverton's biggest moneymaker.

But this year has been especially difficult. Colorado is coming off one of its warmest winters on record and among its lowest snowfall totals in more than a century, while tourism trends have softened nationwide.

"Never is it an easy-peasy winter, and this one's harder than most," said DeAnne Gallegos, spokeswoman for the Silverton Chamber of Commerce.

After a pandemic-era surge in outdoor tourism, Silverton's

economy is settling into its more familiar, volatile pattern. As of 2022, tourism accounted for roughly 87% of the town's economy and more than half its workforce, leaving businesses vulnerable to unpredictable climate extremes and shifting travel habits.

"This is going to be a big wake-up call for us to be frank, right? Like, when we don't have a snow year, what are we going to do?" Gallegos said.

As it turns out, a lot. The town has made a concerted effort to begin looking forward, and has developed a plan that looks to expand the economy and encourage business growth.

See SILVERTON, 8A

See WATER USE, 8A

## DHS course mixes conservation, Southwest Colorado

BY ELIZABETH POND  
HERALD STAFF WRITER

For students in the new Durango High School Interdisciplinary Studies in Southwest Conservation course, learning extends far beyond the classroom.

Earlier this month, the class trekked out to the open space by the Old Fort near Hesperus to track discarded wildlife collars left behind by elk – one of many adventures the class has embarked on since the course was

rolled out in fall 2025.

The course for juniors and seniors, which is co-taught by DHS teachers Jacob Branch-Boyle and Sam Travis, combines outdoor fieldwork with professional mentorship with guest speakers and in-classroom academic study.

"We're such an environment-oriented community that a Southwest Conservation class (seemed like it) would be a really cool opportunity," Travis said.



ELIZABETH POND/Durango Herald

Wildlife Biologist Chris Jones, center, shows Durango High School students in a Southwest conservation class how to track wildlife collars discarded from elk using a telemetry device March 5.

Travis and Branch-Boyle try to get the 41-student class outside at least once a month on smaller field trips to places like the Durango School District SOIL Lab and the Durango Fish Hatchery, Travis said.

Several bigger field trips farther from campus – like the wildlife collar search, a tour of the Old One Hundred Mine in Silverton and plans for an upcoming trip to an ethical, conservation-based bison ranch in

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