

Drought

Owyhee farmers face another tough year

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

NYSSA, Ore. — The water supply situation for farmers in Eastern Oregon who depend on the Owyhee Project is expected to be as bad as last year and maybe worse.

“The situation is probably a little worse than last year,” said Bruce Corn, a farmer and member of the Owyhee Irrigation District’s board of directors. “If we have a super hot summer, it could be much worse.”

The Owyhee Project, which supplies irrigation water for 1,800 farms and 118,000 acres of irrigated land in Eastern Oregon and part of Southwestern Idaho, plans to start flowing water into the system April 20.

The start-up date is three days later than last year and more than two weeks later than some years.

An Easter storm that dropped up to three-quarters of an inch of rain on some areas allowed the board to delay the start-up date, with the hope that the available water will stretch further into the summer, said OID Manager Jay Chamberlin.

The OID board this week set the final 2015 water allotment for its patrons at 1.5 acre-feet. That is up from the 1.3 acre-foot allotment it tentatively set last month but below last year’s 1.7 acre-foot allotment and far below the normal allotment of 4 acre feet.

Despite sharply reducing the 2014 allotment, the system stopped deliver-



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

An onion field near Nyssa, Ore., is prepared for watering April 16. Farmers who depend on the Owyhee Project are bracing for another tough water year.

ing water in August, two months earlier than normal, and many growers ran out of water in July.

In an effort to save water for high-value crops such as onions, farm-

ers in the region left an estimated 15 to 20 percent of farm land fallow last year and they also planted more crops that require less water.

Farmers will get creative in their

copping choices again this year, said Corn, who will plant more peas, a low-water crop, and less corn, a high-water crop.

Onion farmer Paul Skeen, who will plant more wheat and peas and less sugar beets to stretch his water, said farmers in the area are becoming smarter about how they handle their water, including turning to drip irrigation.

“People are really concentrating on trying to do the best job with the water they have,” said Skeen, who put 40 percent of his onion acres on a drip system this year.

The 201,000 acre-feet of available water stored in the Owyhee Reservoir is far below normal for this time of year but close to last year’s amount, Chamberlin said.

However, there is virtually no snow in the Owyhee basin and stream flows are way below last year’s level.

River in-flows into the reservoir are at 320 cubic feet per second, down from about 700 at this time last year and well below the normal 4,000 during a good water year, Chamberlin said.

Corn said the poor stream flow forecast is one of the reasons this year’s allotment was set lower than last year, despite the comparable reservoir storage situation.

“We just don’t anticipate the river flows being very good at all ... because we have virtually no snowpack,” he said.

Klamath water transfer bill passes committee

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Irrigators would be able to transfer or lease water rights in Oregon’s Klamath Basin before they’re formally adjudicated under a bill recently approved by a key legislative committee.

Senate Bill 206 would allow temporary transfers for quantified water rights to give irrigators more flexibility even if the legal process deciding ownership is still pending.

The bill was met with resistance from opponents of a broader deal intended to resolve disputes over water in the region between farmers, conservationists and tribes.

The larger agreement calls for the controversial removal of four hydroelectric dams in the region and opponents of SB 206 claimed the bill was a necessary component of the deal.

Despite the opposition, the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources unanimously referred the bill for a vote on the House floor with a “do pass” recommendation on April 20.

A companion bill, Senate Bill 264, which gives state water regulators the authority to implement a deal with irrigators in the Upper Klamath Basin, was also unanimously approved during the work session.

Central Washington irrigation district reduces water

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

ELLENSBURG, Wash. — The Kittitas Reclamation District began water deliveries to growers on April 20 but at about 55 percent of the normal volume because of the low winter snowpack.

Allotments will be 1.25 cubic feet per second per acre per 24 hours, down from the normal 2.25 cubic feet per second, said Ken Hasbrouch, district manager in Ellensburg. The 1.25 cu-

bic feet per second is equal to about 2.5 acre-feet per acre and 2.25 cubic feet per second is about 4.5 acre-feet per acre.

That’s in response, he said, to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation estimating junior water right holders in the Yakima Basin will get 60 percent of a normal water supply this summer because of low winter snowpack.

“We will irrigate at the start of the season just like any other and try to get our acres watered up so

first-cutting hay has the water necessary,” Hasbrouch said.

Further reductions may be made in mid-June after the first cutting of Timothy hay, he said.

“We will be looking toward longevity for the season,” he said. “I will try to come up with a number that works so we can reach for September.”

Normally, the district provides irrigation water until Oct. 15. Hay, cattle pasture and orchards are

among the biggest crops in the district.

Growers follow a rotation of replanting a portion of their Timothy and alfalfa fields each fall. That probably won’t happen this fall because there probably won’t be any irrigation water by then, Hasbrouch said.

The district, the sixth largest irrigation district in the state, serves about 60,000 acres, or two-thirds of the irrigated acres in Kittitas County. It has 330 miles of canals

and laterals from Lake Easton Dam, 78 miles downriver to the end of the Kittitas Valley. It is entirely junior water rights controlled by the Bureau of Reclamation and confirmed through the state Department of Ecology.

The bureau will reconsider usage at the start of May and start of June. It may ease restrictions if there’s a lot of rain but if generally dry conditions continue, the 60 percent may tighten up more, the bureau has said.

Forecast bodes well for Southern Idaho

By JOHN O’CONNELL
Capital Press

AMERICAN FALLS, Idaho — Amid an unprecedented early start to the irrigation season, Bureau of Reclamation water managers see promise in a new long-term weather forecast increasing the odds of wet spring and summer weather throughout Southern Idaho.

On April 16, the National Weather Service Climate Prediction Center predicted a greater chance of wetter-than-normal weather throughout Southern Idaho from May through August. Oregon, Northern Idaho and Eastern Washington have equal chances of wet or dry weather, and Western Washington has a better chance of drier weather.

The odds of above-normal temperatures are also slightly increased in Southern Idaho.

“They’re banking on a more active Southwest monsoon season,” said National Weather Service meteorologist Mike Huston.

Huston cautioned that Southern Idaho rainfall is so limited during the summer, even a slight increase in rainfall can put the region above normal.

Ron Abramovich, water supply specialist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, said any rainfall would allow irrigators to turn off sprinklers and extend their water supplies.

“It would be great if it does materialize,” Abramovich said.

Mike Beus, Reclamation water operations manager, said the forecast is good news. But he acknowledged snowpack is below normal and American Falls Reservoir is 200,000 acre feet below capacity due to management precautions that were un-



John O’Connell/Capital Press

Roland Springer, Upper Snake field manager with the Bureau of Reclamation, stands below American Falls Dam. Looking back, Springer said his office could have reduced outflows from the reservoir more to trap a greater volume of storage water, but BOR had no way of knowing the weather would turn dry and had to maintain flood control space as a precaution.

necessary, in hindsight, but appropriate based on information at the time. Reclamation allowed above minimum required flows to pass through the reservoir to maintain flood control space. But the past few months have been abnormally dry, leaving them with more room than necessary for runoff.

“We’re right where we want to be in Palisades Reservoir and below where we want to be in American Falls,” Beus said. “If only our foresight were as good as our hindsight.”

In December and January, 1,200 cubic feet per second was released from American Falls and 1,500 cubic feet per second from Milner Dam. Outflows from the dams were increased to 3,000 cubic feet per second on Feb. 12 — well above minimum flow requirements but still below the long-term average.

Reclamation Upper Snake Field Manager Roland Springer said Snake River water managers with the Committee of Nine have questioned Reclamation’s decision. He stands by the

choice, given the facts at the time, but agrees communication should improve.

“The one thing I would really do next year is make sure people knew ahead of time what that decision was and how it would impact them,” Springer said. “If we had that conversation before we made the change, then we’d really dig in and see where are the flexibilities, what are their concerns, what are their interests, and we’d work through them.”

The reservoir system is 86 percent full, which is 120 percent of average levels for the date, Beus said. Beus emphasized there’s still plenty of high-elevation snow yet to melt, though snowpack is disappearing earlier than usual.

Snowpack is 84 percent of average above Palisades Reservoir, though a critical snow survey site, Thumb Divide, has just a 39 percent snow-water equivalent remaining, evidencing that snow is melting rapidly.

Beus said the snowpack decline has slowed recently due to cooler weather and a few small snow storms.



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