

Western weather a month ahead of calendar

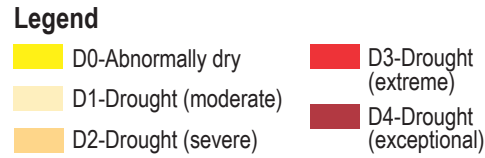
By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

Is it Christmas yet? The weather patterns rolling across the Pacific Northwest and Northern California seem out of sync with the calendar, an environmental science professor said.

Gregory Jones, a Southern Oregon University professor who tracks weather and climate data, said the past year was seemingly off by a month in temperature — March was like April, June was like July, and so on. And the storms and rain of October were more typical of November.

Things usually balance out over time, but the amount of snow and rain that fell in October was 150 percent to 400 percent of normal in many parts of Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Northern California, Jones reported in a monthly update he emails to

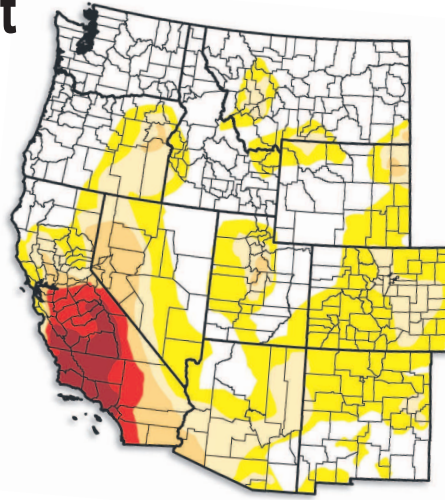
Western U.S. drought conditions (As of Nov. 1)



Intensity of drought by percent area affected

Date	None	D0-4	D1-4	D2-4	D3-4	D4
Current	44.7%	55.3	25.3	11.2	5.7	2.8
3 mo. ago	27.6	72.3	32.2	11.1	6.1	2.8
1 yr. ago	27.1	72.9	54.5	39.2	22.4	6.9

Source: National Drought Mitigation Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln



Capital Press graph

subscribers.

The best result of the deluge is that significant portions of the four states “have all seen drought conditions removed,” Jones said.

The USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service

tweeted that one of its automated monitoring stations, on the North Fork of the Bull Run River on the flanks of Oregon’s Mount Hood, measured 33.5 inches of rain in October — 298 percent of normal. The previous October

record at that spot was 23.2 inches, in 1990.

The October rain and snow flushed out and reinvigorated river systems and recharged soil moisture, Jones said. Reservoir levels jumped and water levels in farm storage

ponds increased as well, he said.

“Hopefully we’ll have more of that in winter and a reasonable snowpack, too,” he said.

Jones said the extreme wet pattern probably won’t last. Statistically, a wet early winter is followed by dry conditions in the second half of winter, he said. Dry conditions often lead to harder freezes and frosts, which could be a concern to Northwest farmers after fairly “benign” springs the last several years, he noted.

Meanwhile, climate scientists and weather forecasters are keeping an eye on conditions in the North Pacific Ocean, where colder water is building. A colder ocean would likely mean a colder and wetter winter for the northern tier of the U.S. from California’s Bay Area east to the Mid-Atlantic, Jones said.

USDA to revise predator control studies

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

The USDA Wildlife Services division has agreed to revise environmental studies that underpin its predator control program under the settlement of a legal dispute.

Wildearth Guardians, an environmental group, originally filed a complaint against the agency in 2012, claiming its predator control practices were based on a “woefully outdated and inadequate” environmental study from 1994, even though conditions have since changed.

Now that USDA must rely on newer data, the nonprofit expects the agency will re-assess its strategies for predators across the U.S., said Bethany Cotton, wildlife program director for the group.

“I would hope they’d look at much more recent peer-reviewed science and adopt a more conservation-minded and non-lethal approach,” Cotton said.

Capital Press was unable to reach a USDA spokesman for comment.

In its lawsuit, the group argued that the 1994 study “fails to take into account recent reports on the risks and inefficiencies of Wildlife Services’ activities, dramatic changes in public perceptions and values pertaining to wildlife, and new biological and scientific information.”

Despite the study’s flaws, USDA has “tiered” more recent predator control decisions upon those findings, including the state program for Nevada, where the lawsuit was filed, according to the complaint.

The recent settlement applies to all predator management plans in the country, not just in Nevada, said Cotton. USDA has already begun revising its studies for several states, she said.

In 2013, the USDA initially convinced U.S. District Judge Miranda Du to dismiss the case because Wildearth Guardian lacked the legal standing to pursue the lawsuit.

However, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals overturned that decision last year, ruling that the environmental group had suffered enough concrete injury from Wildlife Service’s actions to qualify for standing.

After months of negotiations, the USDA and Wildearth Guardians have reached a settlement under which the agency will phase out “any reliance” on the 1994 environmental study and replace all decisions “tiered” to it.

Record farm income during drought a puzzle

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Washington state set a record in 2015 for farm production, even though the state suffered a historic drought — creating a paradox for economists, producers and policymakers to puzzle over.

The USDA recently released its annual statistical bulletin for Washington, a report on yields, prices, acres harvested and livestock sold in 2015. The state’s agricultural production totaled \$10.7 billion, topping by 5 percent the record \$10.2 billion set in 2014.

Apple prices were a big reason. The drought lessened the harvest, but higher prices pushed the value of the crop to \$2.4 billion, about \$500 million more than in 2014.

But even without apples, the state’s aggregate farm economy held up, defying expectations that the drought would inflict a heavy overall loss.

Washington State University Extension economist Michael Brady said other factors may have “sort of swamped the



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

A sprinkler shoots water over a field in southwestern Washington in the summer of 2015 during a severe drought that hit the entire state. Nevertheless, the value of Washington’s agriculture production reached an all-time high of \$10.7 billion that year, according to the USDA.

drought’s negative effects.”

“There are a lot of reasons farm income could have increased in 2015. It would take a more detailed study,” he said. “It could be that net farm income would have been higher” without the drought.

The USDA did not attempt to assess drought effects. Gains and losses in crop values were as diverse as the state’s agriculture.

“Every one has a little bit of a story,” said Chris Mertz, Northwest director of the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Heading into the 2015 growing season, the Washington State Department of Agriculture projected that crop losses would total \$1.2 billion, a figure widely reported to highlight the potential severity of the drought.

The number was based primarily on anticipated water shortages in the Yakima Valley, the state’s most valuable farm region.

The losses did occur, said Urban Eberhart, manager of the Kittitas Reclamation District based in Ellensburg.

Yakima Valley farmers with senior water rights received full supplies, but growers in the Kittitas district and elsewhere with more junior rights received less than half their normal allotment from the Bureau of Reclamation.

“You have negative impacts on half the users and the other half is doing OK,” Eberhart said. “There were significant economic losses to a lot of individual growers in our district. There’s no question about it.”

The state Department of Ecology — the lead agency in organizing drought relief for fish, cities and farms — has asked WSDA to assess farm losses, including in the Yakima Valley irrigation districts vulnerable to water curtailments. A final report is expected by February.

Winegrape producers say vintage good despite weather

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

Oregon’s vineyard and winery operators are by nature an optimistic, glass-half-full bunch, and their assessment of the 2016 harvest is no exception.

The Oregon Wine Board’s annual harvest report said the fruit produced throughout the state was marked by “wonderful concentration and complexity with characteristic natural acidity” despite numerous quirks in the growing season.

An unusually warm spring produced a grape bud break two to four weeks earlier than normal, and a following hot spell condensed the flowering period and caused a smaller fruit set for most producers, wine board Communications Manager Michelle Kaufmann wrote. Average conditions prevailed during the summer, causing smaller berry size but “a higher concentration of flavors,” according to the Nov. 8 report.

The 2016 vintage produced “practically immaculate fruit” with few disease or pest problems, according to the report. Yields statewide were a mix of higher and lower than average. Crop production was down slightly in the Willamette Valley but up in Southern Oregon and Eastern Oregon, Kaufmann said.

The harvest report includes accounts from growers and winemakers throughout the state’s regions. In Eastern Oregon, viticulturist Jason Magnaghi of Figgins Family Wines described the vintage as one of the most interesting in his 16 years.

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NOTICE OF PUBLIC MEETING

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) announces a meeting of the Washington State Technical Advisory Committee on November 22, 2016 from 9:30 am to 3:00 pm, 316 W. Boone Ave., Suite 450, Spokane, WA. Remote access is also available.

For more information contact Bonda Habets, (509) 323-2900. 46-11/14

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