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Idaho

Rain damages much of Eastern Idaho's first alfalfa cutting

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BLACKFOOT, Idaho — Doug Finicle recently cut what he considered to be a beautiful alfalfa crop — at least before a couple of heavy rainstorms arrived.

"It was weed free and cut early, and it was dairy quality," Finicle said. "I'd be really surprised if it's dairy quality now."

He's one of several Eastern Idaho farmers whose hopes of a high-testing first cutting of alfalfa were quashed by storms.

Finicle, of Pingree, said his hay is nearly dry and ready to bale, but the quality is compromised. He said the hay market has picked up compared to last year, but it remains to be seen how the recent rain will affect regional hay prices.

"Before it rained, dairy quality was maybe \$150 per ton. Nobody is saying anything now," Finicle said. "Maybe dairy quality went up and feeder went down because the supply of feeder hay just increased."

Dubois farmer Chad Larsen said he started cutting hay on June 5 and managed to cut and bale two pivots before he was forced to stop on June 10, because of rain.

He said about 95 percent of his hay crop remains to be harvested, and though yields will likely be strong, the de-

layed harvest will likely render his crop feeder quality.

"I'm going to start back up with the swathers tomorrow," Larsen said.

Larsen said there's "quite a bit of hay down" between Idaho Falls and Dubois that got wet.

Kelli Morrison arranges transportation to haul hay over a broad region, working for a Boise satellite office of Creswell, Ore.-based Crosswind Logistics.

Morrison said hay farmers sustained heavy rain damage to their first cuttings throughout Eastern Idaho and in the Weiser area, and there have been fewer loads of good, dry hay to ship recently.

"I'm usually shipping about 100 loads per month," Morrison said. "This month, I've moved nine. All of the rain we've had has killed me."

Reed Findlay, University of Idaho Extension educator for Bingham and Bannock counties, said he recently assessed rain-damaged alfalfa in the Tyhee area near Pocatello, which is still usable but won't make dairy quality.

Findlay believes quite a bit of Eastern Idaho's first cutting of alfalfa was baled and out of the field before the storms arrived. Findlay added that weather conditions were ideal for hay growth before the storm.

"We've had way worse rain storms that have ruined a lot more hay than this past rain storm," Findlay said.



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Former farmland in Power County, Idaho, houses a new solar farm. Solar power is undergoing tremendous growth in Idaho.

Groundwater users leery of solar power development

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

TWIN FALLS, Idaho — An organization representing Idaho groundwater irrigators is concerned about electricity rates being driven up by the rapid recent growth in solar energy throughout the state.

Officials with Idaho Ground Water Appropriators Inc. serve on three different Idaho Power advisory committees to encourage the company to provide "reliable power at a fair price." Electricity is a major expense for farmers who pump water from Idaho wells, and are responsible for 25 to 30 percent of the power company's summer demand.

Rather than making costly upgrades to its coal-power plants to meet federal clean air requirements, Idaho Power plans to phase out two of its

projects early — beginning in 2019, with a unit at the Valmy plant it co-owns with Nevada Energy. But the power company is forced by federal law to buy qualifying clean energy from projects that supply solar or wind power.

The company's annual report for 2016 estimated the cost of clean power it was required to purchase under the federal Public Utility Regulatory Policies Act at \$66.41 per megawatt-hour, compared with \$42.04 for other purchased power.

For a select few farmers who sell or lease their land for wind or solar development, alternative energy can provide a financial boon. The remainder are simply stuck with higher power bills, Lynn Tominaga, IGWA executive director, said.

"We are concerned about the solar growth trend," Tomi-

naga said. "The more solar you put on, the more cost is pushed onto the other rate payers."

According to a report by the Solar Energy Industries Association, solar power represents 1.4 percent of the nation's power portfolio and is expected to grow to 4 percent by 2020, before the federal Solar Investment Tax Credit is reduced from 30 percent to 10 percent in 2021. The report shows Idaho's solar growth, at 132 new megawatts, ranked fifth among states in the first quarter of 2017 and represented a 60 percent increase in the state's solar capacity. Since the start of 2016, Idaho passed 22 states to become the 17th largest solar production state.

Tess Park, Idaho Power's vice president of power supply, explained a challenge with solar and wind power is that it isn't reliable when the sun

isn't shining or the wind isn't blowing, and the company must have backup generation capacity in place. To help address that challenge the company plans to join with several Western power companies to pool resources through the Energy Imbalance Market. The market, run by California Independent System Operators, allows participants to purchase the lowest-cost power on their combined systems and dispatch it where it's needed every hour. Idaho Power plans to go live on the market in April 2018. PacifiCorp is also a participant.

"We may have a gas plant that's not fully dispatched," Park explained. "With this market we may not have to have that plant dispatched because we could get (power) from the market, if it was less expensive."

New Treasure Valley water group takes on raft of issues

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — The Treasure Valley Water Users Association has taken on several important issues since forming two years ago this month.

The impetus for the group's formation was to fight the state's plan to count flood control releases from Boise River system reservoirs against reservoir water storage rights.

"We've really been needing something like this here for 30 years and ... this was the issue that brought (water users) together in the Treasure Valley," said TVWUA Executive Director Roger Batt.

That fight is headed to the Idaho Supreme Court but in the meantime the TVWUA has delved into other issues important to water users in southwestern Idaho.

"We seem to have our plate full," said TVWUA President Clinton Pline, who represents the Nampa and Meridian Irrigation District. "There are always plenty of things to work on when it comes to water."



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

The Boise River flows through Garden City in April. Formed in June 2015, the Treasure Valley Water Users Association now represents 320,000 of the 350,000 irrigated acres in southwestern Idaho. The group is involved in many water-related issues, including the push for more storage capacity on the Boise River system.

The association is involved in an effort to obtain state funding to help farmers and ranchers in the area implement best management practices to improve water quality. The group helped convince lawmakers this year to approve \$500,000 in ongoing funding toward that goal.

The association also holds

periodic "water colleges" for local elected officials as well as other decision makers and media, is pushing for more water storage capacity on the Boise River system and wants to update flow gages so water managers have instant access to complete river flow data.

The group is working with the local flood district on chan-

nel maintenance to attempt to get the Boise River flowing better.

Improving water quality in drainage ditches is another project the group hopes to get involved in, and the TVWUA wants to help irrigation districts obtain funding to fully automate their head works, Pline said.

According to Batt, the group now represents about 320,000 of the 350,000 irrigated acres in Water District 63, which stretches from Boise to Parma.

The group's membership includes virtually every irrigation district and canal company in the region.

Those entities manage a water delivery system of 1,500 miles of canals and laterals that deliver water to farms and ranches as well as golf courses, subdivisions, parks and municipalities.

TVWUA has a wide range of affiliate members, including local Farm Bureaus, agribusinesses, individual farms and ranches and law firms.

Because the TVWUA's area includes the state's three largest cities and 14 of the state's 42 legislative districts, the group also has the potential to wield significant political clout, Batt said.

"They are an effective group. They have done some good work so far and I expect they will continue to do good work," said Sen. Steve Rice, R-Caldwell, chairman of the Senate Agricultural Affairs Committee.

Barley growers expect a good crop but not a record in 2017

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Idaho's 2017 barley crop was planted as much as three weeks later than normal in some parts of the state so there likely won't be a repeat of last year's record yields.

But growers, researchers and industry leaders say there have been no major problems so far with the 2017 barley crop and it should be a good one given a decent summer.

"Our barley crop won't be the exceptional crop we saw last year but it's still shaping up to be a very decent crop," said Idaho Barley Commission Administrator Kelly Olson.

During a conference call with IBC board members, University of Idaho grain researchers Chris Rogers and Juliet Marshall said barley planting was erratic in many areas because of wet conditions.

Planting "was definitely not as early as we've seen the last few years," Rogers said. Planting in the Kimberly area was 2-4 weeks behind in most areas, he said.

Marshall said her winter barley trials are about half the size they've been this time the past couple of years. But, she added, "Pretty much everything looks OK so far."

Timothy Pella, who represents industry on the commission, told Capital Press the 2017 crop is progressing well.



Sean Ellis/Capital Press File

Barley grows in a southwestern Idaho field last July. Many farmers report that wet weather delayed planting this year, so barley yields are likely to be less than last year's.

"I don't see any major issues at this time," said Pella, program manager at the Anheuser-Busch elevator in Idaho Falls.

Growers in North Idaho had a difficult time getting barley planted this year due to a wet spring, said Bonners Ferry grower Wes Hubbard, an IBC commissioner.

"There was a lot of flooding and we ended up having to go around a lot of wet spots," he said. "Considering how late it was, it looks better than I expected. I'm pretty surprised how good it does look and how much I was able to get planted."

Picabo farmer and IBC commissioner Pat Purdy said there was no significant delay in planting in his area.

"We were about on time," he said. "I think the crop looks good and we're heading for a good year."

Olson said barley acres in Idaho, which totaled 600,000 in 2016, will be down 15-20 percent this year but they will be down much more in Montana and North Dakota. She anticipates Idaho will again lead the nation in barley production this year.

"We grew 31 percent of the overall U.S. barley crop last year and we'll easily top that number this year," she said.

The late start to planting in 2017 means Idaho's record barley yields in last year won't be matched this year, Olson said.

"If you lost 7 days to two weeks growing time, that's certainly not going to allow you to have record yields," she said. "We're expecting a good year, just not a record year."

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