

Reservoir levels raise optimism for 2020 supply

By Jayson Jacoby
Baker City Herald

From Lyle Umpleby's perspective, the 2019 irrigation started well and finished even better.

Umpleby, who manages the Powder Valley Water Control District in southern Union County, said the district's two reservoirs, Wolf Creek and Pilcher Creek, are holding about 20% of their capacity this fall.

"Usually we're down to 10% or less," Umpleby said in mid-October.

This year's reservoir carryover is even larger than in 2017, which followed the winter of 2016-17 and its snowpack that set records in places.

Although this year's unusually abundant carryover of water is due to a couple of anomalies, about

which more later, Umpleby said 2019 was in all respects a much better year, from a water supply standpoint, than drought-stricken 2018.

"It was a good water year, definitely," he said. "Everybody had sufficient water this year."

In 2018 neither reservoir filled due to a skimpy mountain snowpack.

The statistical differences between the past two years are dramatic.

In the Powder basin, the snowpack on April 1, 2019, was 33% above average.

One year earlier it was 30% below average.

In 2019 the district didn't start doling out stored water from the reservoirs until mid-June, Umpleby

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— **Lyle Umpleby, manager, Powder Valley Water Control District in Union County**

said.

That's about two weeks later than in 2018 — and in that year irrigation with stored water started with reservoirs that weren't full, as was the case in 2019.

But back to those anomalies.

Umpleby said that the reservoirs are holding more water than usual not so much because inflows were high, but because widespread rain during September coincided with the final cutting of hay in fields that are normally irrigated, post-haying,

with water from the reservoirs.

Because farmers had to wait for their hay to dry, they were not able to resume irrigation as they normally would, Umpleby said.

That meant more water stayed in the reservoirs than would normally be the case late in the season.

A second factor, Umpleby said, was that one large landowner is converting acreage from hay to another crop, which further reduced the demand for late summer/early fall irrigation water from the reservoirs.

Baker County's Phillips Reservoir, a key source of irrigation water for Baker Valley, also fared better this year than last.

Phillips, along the Powder River about 17 miles southwest of Baker City, is holding more than twice as

much water at this time than it was a year ago.

Carryover is crucial at Phillips.

Because the reservoir's capacity is more than four times the combined capacity of Pilcher Creek and Wolf Creek reservoirs, when Phillips is drained almost empty by late fall, as happened in five of the previous six years, only a well above-average winter snowpack is sufficient to refill it the following spring.

As of early October Phillips was holding about 22% of its capacity. That's more than every year since 2012, with the exception of 2017, when the previous winter's prodigious snowpack contributed to a major carryover. In October 2017 the reservoir held twice as much water as it does this year.

WATER

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This weekly assessment of conditions nationwide is produced through a partnership between the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the United States Department of Agriculture, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

For much of the past three years at least parts of Northeastern Oregon, including Baker, Union and Wallowa counties, were enduring drought or rated as abnormally dry, one level below official drought.

(The Drought Monitor has five levels — abnormally dry, followed by moderate, severe, extreme and exceptional drought.)

But since April 9, 2019, no part of Baker, Union or Wallowa counties has been in drought, or even abnormally dry. That culminated a gradual easing of the significant drought that plagued much of the region during 2018.

On April 2, most of Baker County was still considered abnormally dry.

Then 0.52 of an inch of rain fell at the Baker City Airport over the next week.

Prior to those storms, most of Baker County was in moderate drought until March 12, and a small part of southern Union County was abnormally dry.

Until Feb. 26 most of Baker County was in severe drought, with the extreme northern part of the county, and a small sliver of

Union County near North Powder, in moderate drought.

The rest of Union County, and all of Wallowa County, were abnormally dry, from Dec. 25, 2018, through Feb. 26.

Through the late summer and most of the fall of 2018, a majority of Baker County was in severe drought, with extreme drought in the far south of the county. Most of Union and Wallowa were in moderate drought, except far northern parts, which were abnormally dry.

Although drought was absent during the 2019 irrigation season, Osborn said she and her staff still had to perform their traditional role as mediators in some cases.

Despite being regulated by the prior appropriate doctrine and the priority dates on

water rates, Osborn said a watermaster's job has a certain amount of flexibility that can help solve conflicts among irrigators to their collective benefit.

For instance, she said she frequently helps to facilitate agreements in which multiple water rights holders combine their allotments and then share the water. The goal, Osborn said, is that each irrigator receives more than the individuals might have gotten had they relied on a strict application of prior appropriation.

"We have options that are still within the legal realm to try to get people to work together," Osborn said.

These sharing agreements typically are attractive later in the irrigation season, when water supplies dwindle, she said.

HEMP

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Their decision was validated, though, as the temperature plummeted to the low 20s in the Eagle Valley.

It was a hectic harvest, however, completed in just five days.

"It was all hands on deck," Wilder said.

That community spirit has invigorated Karuna Hemp Farm from the

start, she said.

"It's just unbelievable the amount of community support we've had," she said, citing, among other things, a local resident who lent them the use of a four-wheel drive pickup truck.

Wilder attributes the help in large part to Hammar having lived in the area since he was a third-grader.

"A lot of people know him," she said.

Hammar said there are unique

challenges associated with growing hemp, including overcoming the link, cultivated over multiple generations, between hemp and marijuana and the latter's illicit connotations.

Wilder said she believes, though, that more people every year accept hemp as just another crop, not so different from wheat or corn or alfalfa.

"People still stop and ask questions once in a while," she said, as they drive by and see the distinctive shape of the plants waving in the

wind.

Ultimately, Wilder said she hopes that as the novelty of seeing hemp fields subsides and the industry matures through the occasional hysterical nature of its adolescence, that it will serve two purposes.

The first is helping to perpetuate farms, and the communities, including Richland and Halfway, that depend on them.

"This is a way for young farmers to make a living and pay a mort-

gage," Wilder said.

And second, she hopes the hemp revolution convinces people, including those who don't make it a business, to relearn what once was an essential skill.

"I think it's very important for people to learn how to grow things, for food security and for medicine," Wilder said. "Anyone can grow a few hemp plants. It's something that people can do proactively for themselves."