

WATER

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The basic idea, Osborn said, is based on the water right, a legal right that entitles the holder to use a certain amount of water for a beneficial purpose. In Baker County and other places with a large agriculture industry, that purpose in most cases is growing crops.

When water is plentiful the system all but runs itself, she said.

“Pretty much everybody who has a water right can get enough water,” Osborn said.

But in arid regions such as Baker County, where in many places the annual precipitation averages less 12 inches, by some point each year the streams no longer carry enough water to satisfy every water rights holder’s full share.

That’s about the point Osborn expects her office phone to ring.

It’s also the beginning of the hectic season for her and her staff, which includes two assistant watermasters.

That initial call inevitably is followed by others, Osborn said, each made by a water rights holder who no longer is receiving a full allotment.

The watermaster’s duty is to start cutting off water to the holders of the “youngest” rights — those with the most recent date.

Even those can be pretty venerable, however, in a county such as Baker, where the oldest water rights date to the 1860s.

During some drought years over the past decade, Osborn said the watermaster’s office started its “regulation” season — responding to calls from irrigators who were short on water — as early as May.

But 2019 was different.

“We had a really wet spring, it seemed like, and good snowpack obviously helped,” Osborn said. “We were about two to three weeks behind (last year) when we started regulating. We definitely had more water this year.”

The irrigation season isn’t determined



S. John Collins/Baker City Herald

Baker County Watermaster Marcy Osborn said 2019 was a good year in terms of irrigation water supply.

solely by water volume, though.

Osborn said the timing of the spring snowmelt can also have a major effect on how early her office starts getting requests from water rights holders.

This spring, for instance, the snow melted slowly and steadily. That meant streams in most of the county continued to produce ample volumes well into summer.

In some years, by contrast, a heat wave in May will rapidly melt much of the mountain snow, leading to a big, but short-lived, flush of water.

That negates to a large extent the benefits of even a deep snowpack, since irrigators can only use so much water at one time.

“If it warms up into the 80s in May, we can be in the same boat as if we didn’t have a lot of snowpack,” Osborn said. “Springtime really makes or breaks the irrigation season around here.”

This year, as Osborn mentioned, most of the factors were favorable.

And the combination of ample precipitation and a mountain snowpack that melted slowly was reflected in the U.S. Drought Monitor (see maps at right).

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Watching The Drought Disappear...

