

Rain, rain go away

Farmers generally welcome spring rains, but the late May downpours did far more harm than good in parts of the Grande Ronde Valley also affected by a February flood

By Dick Mason
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The heavy rains which hit Union County in late May doused the spirits of farmers with even the most buoyant of attitudes.

The rainfall caused the Grande Ronde River and Catherine Creek to jump their banks and flood fields, resulting in the loss of at least hundreds of acres of crops.

The flood hit Curt and Annette Howell of Imbler like an anchor. Two hundred acres of the Howells' farmland just east of Imbler was covered with floodwater. About half of the land remains submerged to depths of 5 to 6 feet in place, although it's much shallower in most places. Much of the water is from the late May flood but some is also from the February flood, Curt Howell said.

The Howells lease the land to another Union County farmer who had 100 acres of crops growing on the land before the flood. The crops were all lost.

A pump is running on the land to remove the water. The Howells did have two pumps operating but one broke down and will have to be replaced at a cost of about \$10,000.

One of the biggest flood-related problems the Howells are dealing with now is the large amount of debris which was swept on to their land.

"A lot of it is stuck in the fencing. I don't know how we are going to get rid of it," said Curt Howell, the owner of Oregon Trail Seeds.

The largest pieces of flotsam include logs which floated in from the Grande Ronde River.



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About 200 acres of land owned by Curt and Annette Howell east of Imbler was hit by flooding in late May. The photo shows a portion of the 100 acres which are still covered by water.

The flood damaged several dikes which were built to protect the land. Howell said these dikes will have to be repaired.

This is the second year in a row the Howells' farm land has been hit by major flooding.

"It is very discouraging and costly," Curt Howell said.

Tim Wallender of the Grande Ronde Valley also did not escape the wrath of the rainfall. He lost between 10 and 15 acres of garbanzo beans and 10 acres of bluegrass due to flooding. The plants died after being submerged for an extended period.

This occurred after Wallender had spent arduous hours replanting his crops after he and many other Union County farmers were

hit by a major flood in February caused by the almost overnight melting of a major snowfall.

"Mother Nature has made it a very difficult year for us," Wallender said.

He refuses to let frustration get the best of him, though.

"I stay busy and focus on things I can work on. I don't worry about what I can't control," Wallender said.

This means he focuses his attention on growing crops which are nutrient rich and resistant to diseases, and keeping his equipment in good condition.

Wallender said the acres of garbanzo beans and bluegrass can't be replanted a third time because the second flood hit too late in the

"Mother Nature has made it a very difficult year for us."

— Tim Wallender, Grande Ronde Valley farmer, talking about floods in February and May that damaged fields and crops

year. All was not lost, though, for Wallender has been able to plant barley and oats, which will help feed his cattle.

The Hassinger family farm, about 7 miles northwest of Cove, emerged from the late May flooding in good condition, but not without losses and a big scare. The losses included many acres of wheat which died after the root systems were submerged for an extended period.

The scare involved a levee on the Grande Ronde River which almost broke on May 24. The levee was saved after many people in the area answered a call for help from the Hassinger family of Phil, his wife Trudy and their sons, Jed and Seth, who operate the farm. Phil Hassinger said the support from heroic volunteers who came to their aid at a moment's notice allowed the levy to be sealed off in 4 to 5 hours.

Had the levy not been sealed, the family would have lost 80 acres of crops, including 50 acres of peppermint, Phil Hassinger said.

Today, none of the Hassingers' land is inundated, thanks to extensive pumping.

"We are now irrigating some of the land which was flooded," Phil Hassinger said.

Bill Merrigan, the general

manager of Blue Mountain Seeds in Imbler, said that in some ways the late May flood was deceptive because in many cases the water could not be seen because some crops obscured the standing water on fields. The water could not be seen unless someone walked up to it. Although not easily visible, this water did more than its share of damage to crops.

"When the ground is waterlogged the roots can not get oxygen and plants die," Merrigan said.

Later close inspections of crops revealed the extent of the damage.

"There were not a lot of surprises," Merrigan said.

He said that floodwaters were slow to clear up initially because of cool, wet weather which continued well into June and slowed evaporation.

Merrigan said that the Grande Ronde River was at risk of flooding when the heavy rains hit because of heavy snow melt in the mountains exacerbated by the rain.

On the bright side, farmers in Wallowa County, which also received heavy late May rain, were spared of flooding this spring.

"The heavy rain (in late May) was a surprise but it did no damage," said Susan Roberts, a member of the Wallowa County Board of Commissioners.

Roberts said Wallowa County did not have the early spring dry spell that Union and Baker counties endured. This spring was pretty much ideal for farmers, she said.

"They couldn't be happier," Roberts said.