

# Federal officials predicting expanding drought

Weather Service warns of the possibility of water use cutbacks in California and the Southwest later this year

By Seth Borenstein  
AP Science Writer

With nearly two-thirds of the United States abnormally dry or worse, the government's spring forecast offers little hope for relief, especially in the West where a devastating megadrought has taken root and worsened.

Weather service and agriculture officials warned of possible water use cutbacks in California and the Southwest, increased wildfires, low levels in key reservoirs such as Lake Mead and Lake Powell and damage to wheat crops.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's official spring outlook Thursday, March 18 sees an expanding drought with a drier than normal April, May and June for a large swath of the country from Louisiana to Oregon, including some areas hardest hit by the most severe drought. And nearly all of the continental United States is looking at a warmer than normal spring, except for tiny parts of the Pacific Northwest and southeast Alaska, which makes drought worse.

"We are predicting prolonged and widespread drought," National Weather Service Deputy Director Mary Erickson said. "It's definitely something we're watching and (are) very concerned about."

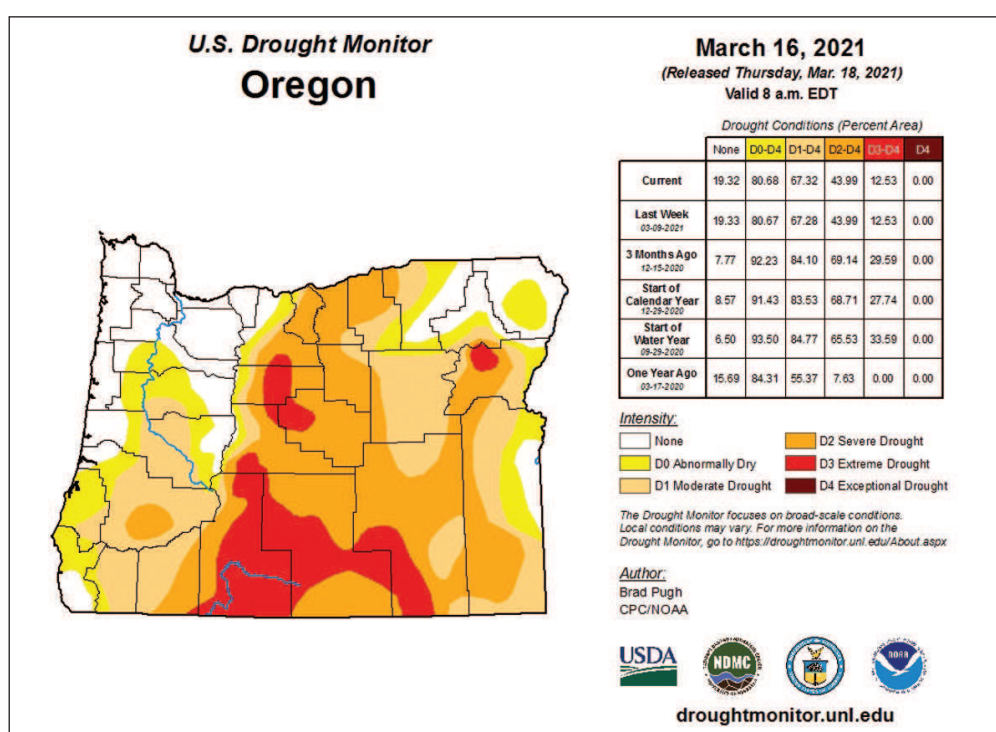
NOAA expects the spring drought to hit 74 million people.

Several factors go into worsening drought, the agency said. A La Nina cooling of parts of the central Pacific continues to bring dry weather for much of the country, while in the South-



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

This drone photo from mid-January 2021 shows how much room there is for water to rise at Owyhee Reservoir, a major source of irrigation water for the Ontario area. As of Friday, March 19, the reservoir was at 54% of capacity.



west heavy summer monsoon rains failed to materialize. Meteorologists also say the

California megadrought is associated with long-term climate change.

Thursday's national Drought Monitor shows almost 66% of the nation is in

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an abnormally dry condition, the highest mid-March level since 2002. And forecasters predict that will worsen, expanding in parts of Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming and South Dakota, with small islands of relief in parts of the Great Lakes and New England.

More than 44% of the nation is in moderate or worse drought, and nearly 18% is

in extreme or exceptional drought — all of it west of the Mississippi River. Climate scientists are calling what's happening in the West a "megadrought" that started in 1999.

"The nearly West-wide drought is already quite severe in its breadth and intensity, and unfortunately it doesn't appear likely that there will be much relief this spring," said UCLA climate scientist Daniel Swain, who writes the Weather West blog and isn't part of the NOAA outlook. "Winter precipitation has been much below average across much of California, and summer precipitation reached record low levels in 2020 across the desert Southwest."

With the Sierra Nevada snowpack only 60% of normal levels, U.S. Department of Agriculture meteorologist Brad Rippey said "there will be some water cutbacks and allocation cutbacks in California and perhaps other areas of the Southwest" for agriculture and other uses. It will probably hit nut crops in the Golden State.

Winter and spring wheat crops also have been hit hard by the western drought with 78% of the spring wheat production area in drought conditions, Rippey said.

Dry, warm conditions in the upcoming months likely will bring "an enhanced wildfire season," said Jon Gottschalck, chief of NOAA's prediction branch.

Swain of UCLA said the wildfires probably will not be as bad as 2020 because so much vegetation burned last year and drought conditions retarded regrowth.

# Idaho could lift mask mandate as 4th lawmaker infected

By Keith Ridler  
Associated Press

BOISE — A fourth lawmaker in the Idaho House of Representatives has tested positive for COVID-19 in less than a week's time and just as the Legislature is debating a bill that would ban local governments from requiring that people wear masks.

The increasing number of lawmakers out sick with the coronavirus has legislative leaders in the conservative state worried they may not be able to finish business in a timely fashion.

"Of course I'm concerned," Republican House Speaker Scott Bedke said Wednesday, March 17, before the announcement of the fourth

COVID-19 diagnosis among his colleagues.

Bedke wasn't wearing a face-covering but put one on before getting in an elevator in the Statehouse. "We're re-emphasizing the safety protocols. We also want to be done by the end of the month. I guess we'll just see how it goes," he said.

A major goal of GOP lawmakers in the Legislature this session has been curbing the emergency powers of the Republican governor to respond to things like pandemics. Legislators have floated several proposals that would restrict Gov. Brad Little's ability to make sweeping directives in the future.

Republican Rep. Julie

Yamamoto said Thursday she tested positive Wednesday afternoon and immediately left the Statehouse. She had been on the House floor earlier in the day without a mask as lawmakers debated a huge tax-cut bill.

All four lawmakers out with the illness are Republicans who rarely or never wear masks.

"I actually feel fine," Yamamoto said. "The coughing is the worst thing. And I was doing that before with just the asthma and allergies."

She said a doctor told her March 12 that the cough was from seasonal allergies, but she decided to get tested anyway.

"As soon as I got the result,

I packed up and went home," she said.

She said she had been persistently coughing during the week but mostly isolated in her office at the Statehouse. She said she never wears a face-covering.

Republican Rep. Bruce Skaug tested positive last week. Republican Reps. Lance Clow and Ryan Kerby tested

positive shortly after and stopped going to the Statehouse this week.

The flurry of positive tests comes as health officials in southwestern Idaho are seeing an increasing number of people infected with the highly contagious variant of COVID-19 first identified in the United Kingdom.

Dr. David Peterman, a

pediatrician and CEO of Primary Health Medical Group, said 30% of positive tests on Wednesday at the health group's facilities in southwestern Idaho were the variant.

"The variant is clearly in our community and increasing," he said.

He said anyone working at the Statehouse should be wearing a mask.

## TELEMEDICINE

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In the Seattle area, it's supplemented with in-person services such as pharmacy delivery and house-call services from nurses who can take blood work and provide similar services.

On Wednesday, the tech giant announced it will immediately expand the service to interested employers in Washington who want to purchase the service for their employees. By the summer, Amazon Care will expand nationally to all Amazon workers, and to private employers across the country who want to join.

In the Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and northern Virginia market, where Amazon is building a second headquarters that will

house more than 25,000 workers, Amazon Care will include the in-person services that are currently limited to Seattle.

"Making this available to other employers is a big step," said Amazon Care Director Kristen Helton in a phone interview. "It's an opportunity for other forward-thinking employers to offer a service that helps bring high-quality care, convenience and peace of mind."

Amazon launched the service 18 months ago for its Washington state employees. Helton said users have given it superior reviews, and business customers were inquiring about being able to buy into the service for their own workers.

Helton said the product is designed to be a supplement or an additional benefit to existing coverage provided by an employer.

## STROKES

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Dr. Karen Joynt Maddox, who was not involved in the research, called the findings "alarming."

"It's a collective call to action to really focus on addressing risk factors for stroke, as well as patient education on the signs and symptoms of stroke so they can call 911 or get to the hospital quickly when these

symptoms begin," said Joynt Maddox, an assistant professor at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis and co-director of its Center for Health Economics and Policy.

Many strokes can be prevented with proper management of high blood pressure and a type of irregular heart-beat called atrial fibrillation, she said.

Future studies need to explore what's driving the

uptick in rural stroke deaths, Joynt Maddox said. "We have to dig into the 'why.' Are stroke risk factors like high blood pressure or atrial fibrillation getting worse? Is access to care ... or social determinants of health getting worse? How might all of these things differ by race and ethnicity?"

"Understanding which factors are associated with these findings is the next step toward identifying solutions."

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colorectal cancer is the  
third most commonly  
diagnosed cancer in  
the U.S.?

In its earliest stages, colon cancer may not produce any symptoms. It's important to have routine screenings in order to prevent colon cancer or find it early, when treatment is most effective. Most physicians recommend screening for people aged 50 or over, or earlier if there is a family history of colorectal cancer and for those with inflammatory bowel disease. There is a range of screening tests available and most are covered by insurance, often without a deductible or co-pay.

If you are 50 or older, or have a family history of colorectal cancer, ask your doctor about screening options.

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