

A drought like no other, NOAA scientist says

Drought covers almost entire Western U.S.

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

SALEM — The West has been so dry and so hot for so long that its current drought has no modern precedent, according to a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration meteorologist.

For the first time in 122 years of record-keeping, drought covers almost the entire Western U.S. as measured by the Palmer Drought Severity Index, said Richard Heim, a drought historian and an author of the U.S. Drought Monitor.

“It’s a very simple ‘yes,’ in terms of this drought being unprecedented,” Heim said.

The Palmer index estimates relative soil moisture based on temperature and precipitation records. Unlike the Standard Precipitation Index, which measures water supply, the Palmer index also takes into account heat-driven demand for water.

‘It’s borderline unprecedented’

In June, about 97% of the West — Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah and Washington — was in water-deficit territory, according to the Palmer index.

Utah was never drier, while Oregon and California were at their second driest on record. Idaho and Arizona were at their third driest ever, and Nevada was at its fourth driest.

Washington was at its 10th driest, while Montana and New Mexico, where recent monsoons have brought relief, were at their 17th driest.

Oregon and Washington state climatologists gave their qualified endorsement for calling this drought “unprecedented.”

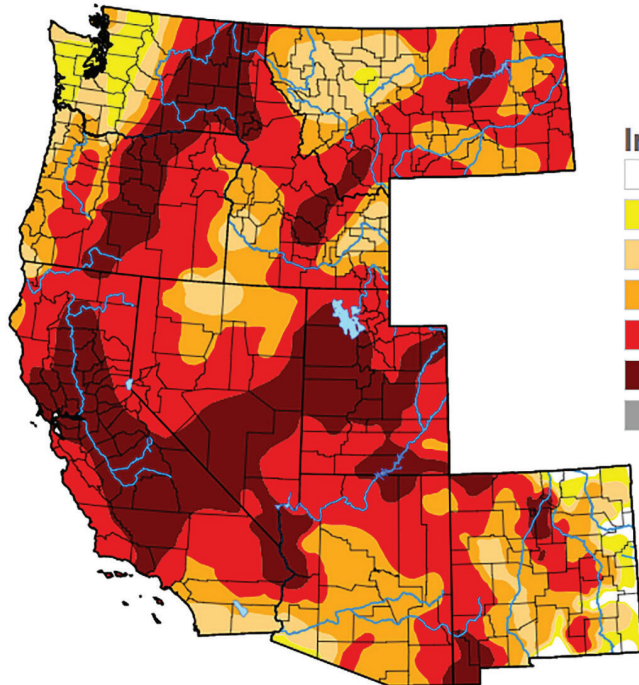
“I’d be slightly cautious about calling it ‘unprecedented,’ but that’s probably a fair description,” Oregon State Climatologist Larry O’Neill said. “It’s borderline unprecedented, or at least among the worst.”

The cumulative effects of the West’s current drought, illustrated by low major reservoirs, gives credence to calling it unprecedented, Washington State Climatologist Nick Bond said.

“I don’t have any real quarrel with using that term,” he said.

Some stage of drought

The Drought Monitor, a partnership between NOAA and the USDA, has been mapping drought in the U.S. since 2000. The percentage of the West in “exceptional drought,” the worst category, has never been higher.



U.S. Drought Monitor

More than 95% of the nine Western states is in some stage of drought.

Heim said the combination of prolonged above-average temperatures and below-normal precipitation set this drought apart from two multiyear droughts that spanned the 1930s and 1950s.

The U.S. entered another extended dry episode in 1998, he said. The drought has eased periodically, but never really went away and reasserted itself beginning last spring, he said.

A 24-month period that ended June 30 was the driest such two-year period ever in the West, according to records dating back to

1895. The same time period was the sixth warmest.

Other two-year dry periods, such as 1976 and 1977, were not as hot, Heim said.

“I would define this (drought) as still part of a 20-plus-year drought,” he said. “In the last year and a half, we have been on an intensifying trend.”

The drought’s depth, duration and cause varies by state, making comparisons between the current drought and past droughts imperfect.

Long dry spells

In measuring drought, “there is no simple best

way,” Bond said. “There are different flavors of drought.”

Washington’s 1977 drought was much worse judged solely by the precipitation index. About 90% of Washington was in exceptional drought in June 1977, compared to less than 1% this June.

Idaho and Oregon also were in deeper droughts in June 1977 than this year, according to the precipitation index. California, however, is worse off this year.

Long dry spells lead to hydrological droughts, when streams and reservoirs are low and wells are dry.

Southern Oregon has fallen into a hydrological drought, and it will

take a long time to recover, O’Neill said.

“Even if we get normal precipitation in the winter, we would expect to be in at least moderate hydrological drought next year,” he said.

The federal Climate Prediction Center says that odds favor a La Nina forming next winter. The climate phenomenon generally means a good snowpack in Washington and a poor snowpack in Northern California.

In Oregon, La Nina often has less pronounced effects, O’Neill said. The dividing line between good and poor snowpacks in La Nina years falls about Roseburg, he said.

“I think the bottom line is we can’t necessarily depend on La Nina for saving us from drought,” he said.

Washington’s 2015 drought started with a warm winter and low snowpack during an El Nino, which has the opposite effect from a La Nina.

The “snowpack drought” led to low stream flows. The drought this year was brought on by a dry spring. Melting snow continued to supply streams.

The 2015 drought was worse for Washington irrigators and a “better example of a climate-change drought,” Bond said.

“It’s going to be the kind of drought we’re going to have because of climate change,” he said.

Coalition seeks relisting of gray wolves in U.S. West

By **KEITH RIDLER**
The Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Wildlife advocates last week petitioned federal officials to restore federal protections for gray wolves throughout the U.S. West after Idaho and Montana passed laws intended to drastically cut their numbers.

Western Watersheds Project, WildEarth Guardians and others sent the petition to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The agency is supposed to respond within 90 days on whether there is enough information for a potential listing under the Endangered Species Act.

The groups cite unregulated hunting, poaching and genetic problems involving small wolf populations.

“Wolves remain completely absent from suitable habitats or perilously close to extinction in many western states, and the handful of states surrounding Yellowstone National Park are now driving the larger populations toward extinction — endangered species listing — by ramping up wolf killing and stripping away hunting and trapping regulations in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming,” said Erik Molvar, executive director of Western Watersheds Project.

In May, Idaho Republican Gov. Brad Little signed a measure lawmakers said could lead to killing 90% of the state’s 1,500 wolves through expanded trapping and hunting. It took effect July 1.

Lawmakers pushing the measure, backed by trappers and the powerful ranching sector but heavily criticized by environmental advocates, often said the state can cut the number of wolves to 150 before federal authorities would take over management. They said reducing the population would reduce attacks on livestock and boost deer and elk herds.

A primary change in the new law allows the state to hire private contractors to kill wolves and provides more money for state officials to hire the contractors. The law also expands killing methods to include trapping and snaring wolves on a single hunting tag, using night-vision equipment, chasing wolves on snowmobiles and ATVs and shooting them from helicopters. It also authorizes year-round wolf trapping on private property.

The state Department of Fish and Game reported in February that the wolf population has held at about 1,500 the past two years. The numbers were derived in part by using remote cameras.



Jacob W. Frank/National Park Service, File

This Nov. 7, 2017, photo provided by the National Park Service shows a wolf in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming. Wildlife advocates on Thursday, July 29, 2021, petitioned federal officials to restore federal protections for gray wolves throughout the U.S. West after Idaho and Montana passed laws intended to drastically cut their numbers.

About 500 wolves have been killed in the state in each of the last two years by hunters, trappers and state and federal authorities carrying out wolf control measures.

Wildlife authorities in Montana, following new laws, have been looking at changes such as increasing the number of wolves an individual can hunt to between five and 10. A decision is expected in August.

Authorities said this year they expect the state’s wolf population to decrease from around 1,150 to between 900 and 950 following a particularly successful hunting season. Over 320 wolves were harvested during the 2020 hunting season — significantly more than the preceding eight-year average of 242 wolves per year, according to a report released by the department in June.

The petition seeks to protect wolves in those two states as well as Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, Washington, Colorado, California, Oregon and northern Arizona. The petition said those states are part of the range of wolves.

“These wolves are at risk of extinction throughout all of their range, and unquestionably are at risk of immediate extinction in significant portions of their range,” the 63-page petition states.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

9th Circuit rejects challenge to beef promotions

Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund questions legality of state beef councils’ promotions

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

SALEM — Promotions funded by state beef councils aren’t an unlawful form of compelled speech, even if third parties are paid to produce the advertisements, according to a federal appeals court.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals has determined that such promotions are government speech, not private speech that’s forcibly subsidized in violation of the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment.

While people can’t be required to subsidize private speech, the government’s own speech isn’t subject to this prohibition because it’s “subject to democratic accountability” through the political process.

The Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund, or R-CALF, challenged the legality of promotions issued by state beef councils, which are partly funded by “checkoff” dollars collected from ranchers.

R-CALF claimed that state beef councils support advertising that’s contrary to the interests of independent beef producers and isn’t protected as “government speech,” since it doesn’t reflect the government’s actual views and is often created by third parties.

The 9th Circuit has now rejected that argument, upholding an earlier ruling that concluded state beef council promotions are ultimately under the authority of USDA — even when third parties develop the advertisements without preapproval from the agency.

Promotions that are preapproved by USDA and explained in budgets submitted to the agency effectively receive “final approval authority” from the federal government, so they’re “therefore plainly government speech,” according to the 9th Circuit.

Even third-party promotions that aren’t subject to preapproval are “effectively controlled” by USDA because Congress envisioned that industry nonprofits would implement promotions under the beef checkoff program, the ruling said.

Federal regulations still require third-party promotions to “strengthen

the beef industry’s position in the marketplace” without mentioning brands or trade names, using deceptive practices or influencing government policies, the ruling said. The USDA also reviews state beef council expenses and can participate in their board meetings.

Though R-CALF claimed such “safeguards are insufficient,” the deciding factor is that the government has the “ability to control speech, even when it declined to do so,” the 9th Circuit said. The USDA can “decertify” state beef councils from using checkoff dollars if it disagrees with how those funds are spent, providing “unquestioned control” over that money.

According to case law, the USDA does not need to “write the copy of the beef advertisements” to make such promotions government speech, the ruling said.

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