

Drought:

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At the end of March, much of Northeastern Oregon was either in extreme drought — the second-worst in a five-level rating system — or severe drought, one step below extreme.

Conditions are somewhat better in a swath that runs from the southern part of Morrow County through much of Umatilla County and into the eastern part of Union County. The rating there is moderate drought.

The rating system:

- abnormally dry
- moderate drought
- severe drought
- extreme drought
- exceptional drought

“That’s not likely to change, with forecasts of below normal moisture,” Cloutier said. “For Washington, the outlook is for below to near normal.”

“We’ve been in La Nina conditions since the fall. In December and early January, we got the storms that usually go with that El Nino/Southern Oscillation state, but since then they’ve stopped. The winter rain and mountain snow we got then didn’t make a dent in the drought. Now we’re headed into ENSO neutral conditions, so less expectation of above normal precipitation.”

“What we need is slow, steady, soaking rain, not thunderstorms that just run off,” Cloutier said. “Almost daily light rain. But we’re not likely to be that lucky.”

Kevin Scheibner, 51, a wheat farmer and cow-calf rancher in upper Wildhorse Creek near Athena, said there is no doubt the drought has hurt producers.

“When there’s less feed in the mountains, there’s less weight on the calves,” he said.

“But,” he added, “the price came up, so it kind of balanced out.”

Scheibner said the prices are “Economics 101” — just supply and demand.

“It’s all about when the rains come, or there’s grass in California, buyers might think they can make a profit, and they’re willing to buy,” he said.

Too late for rain to help in some cases

But even if the spring of 2022 brings frequent deluges to Northeastern Oregon, the water will arrive too late to help some farmers take advantage.



Bennett Hall/EO Media Group

TOP: Trever Hamsher throws out hay for cattle on Pat Voigt’s Prairie City ranch on Friday, March 11, 2022. ABOVE: Bummer calves dig into their hay rations on Pat Voigt’s ranch near Prairie City while a barn cat comes to investigate.

Ward, for instance, said his family won’t plant silage corn this spring, nor will they add any acreage in alfalfa.

“We just simply won’t have the water,” he said. “Hope is not a tactic. We base our crop plans on what we see, and what we see is an empty reservoir.”

Ward was referring to Phillips Reservoir, the impoundment on the Powder River

about 17 miles southwest of Baker City. Its water irrigates about 30,000 acres, mostly in the Baker Valley.

The 2021 drought depleted the reservoir more than in any year since it first filled in 1968.

Ward said he would be grateful if the reservoir reached even half full this spring.

Most reservoirs in the region, including

Phillips, were in somewhat better shape at the end of March.

On the last day of the month, Phillips was up to 10% of its capacity, the highest since last summer.

McKay Reservoir south of Pendleton was at 64% of its capacity, and Cold Springs Reservoir east of Hermiston was at 58%.

Unity Reservoir in southern Baker County was at 62% of capacity, and Thief Valley Reservoir, east of North Powder, was at 91%. Both are significantly smaller, however, than Phillips Reservoir. Unity has about one-third the capacity of Phillips, and Thief Valley about 18%.

Water worries, even where snow lingers

Unlike Bennett, Dean Defrees didn’t have dust to deal with in early March.

Not yet anyway.

“I still have a foot of snow on the ground,” Defrees said on March 8.

His family’s cattle ranch and tree farm are in Sumpter Valley, at an elevation of about 4,200 feet in a reliably snowy part of the county.

But even with the soft snow of late winter hanging around, Defrees said he needed only look north, to the south-facing slopes of the Elkhorn Mountains, to recognize the potential problems looming like the great sedimentary wall that separates the Sumpter and Baker valleys.

“The snow level is up pretty high,” he said. “There’s even some bare spots around Marble Creek Pass. For the second week of March, that’s not a real good sign.”

The situation is if anything more distressing because winter started with such snowy promise.

Defrees said he’s not completely abandoned hope for a belated resuscitation of the snowpack that hasn’t changed much for several weeks.

He said his dad, Lyle Defrees, recalls a distant spring when 20 inches of snow mantled the Sumpter Valley on the 20th of April.

But even if such an unseasonable storm doesn’t materialize, Dean Defrees, like Ward and Bennett, remains optimistic for the prospect of the sort of moist spring that not so many years ago seemed more likely than not.

But if this spring replicates the 2021 version, when rainstorms were few, it could be “a total disaster,” Defrees said.

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