



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

A rainbow appears following showers in the Coast Range. Drought persists in parts of Oregon though the rain has reduced its severity.

Oregon drought: Still facing 'long-term deficit'

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — With rainstorms relentlessly soaking the state throughout spring, Oregonians can be forgiven for assuming that drought fears have dissipated.

Many are surprised to learn that worries about water shortages have persisted despite the stubbornly soggy weather, said Ryan Andrews, a hydrologist at the Oregon Water Resources Department.

Though the season's high rainfall and low temperatures have mitigated what could have been a much worse situation, much of Oregon is still enduring a prolonged "mega-drought" that's afflicting the entire West, Andrews said.

"Though the spring precipitation was nice, it was not enough to overcome the long-term deficit," he said at the Thursday, June 16, meeting of the state's Water Resources Commission, which oversees the agency.

Conditions associated with summer, such as reduced streamflows and soil moisture levels, have been delayed, Andrews said.

Irrigators and other water users must still "proceed with caution," though — particularly in areas where drought has remained severe, such as Central Oregon, Andrews said.

According to a recent study, the past 22 years represent the West's worst mega-drought in about 1,200 years, he said. A mega-drought is an abnormally dry period that lasts more than two decades.

The multi-year drought has lingered through the seasonal intervals of wetness while being aggravated by lower-than-normal snowpacks and earlier "melt-out" in the summer, Andrews said.

Last year, OWRD got 600 reports of domestic wells going dry or yielding less water and has received 300 such complaints so far in 2022, he said. Funding is available for households with low and moderate incomes to repair or replace aging wells.

Of course, the extent and intensity of the drought would be exacerbated without this spring's ample rainfall, he said.

Streamflows unfortunately remain below average in some areas, but statewide the outlook is more optimistic headed into summer, Andrews said.

Some irrigation reservoirs were at record-low levels at the end of last summer, but the prolonged rains have helped replenish them while reducing water demand from farmers, he said.

"This recent precipitation has really helped in terms of reservoir storage and operations," he said.



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

From left, Kni-Co Manufacturing co-owners Molly and Theodore Jones cut a ribbon to mark the sheet metal plant's grand reopening in Wallowa Wednesday, May 25, 2022, while plant manager Robert Burns, Michael Reese and Kelly Guentert look on.

HEAVY METAL

Theodore Jones has high hopes of expansion, more jobs for Kni-Co Manufacturing and Magnum Metals

By BILL BRADSHAW • Wallowa County Chieftain

WALLOWA — An expanded sheet metal manufacturing business held its grand reopening last month in Wallowa, with promises of more high-paying jobs and the transition to an employee-owned company.

"The jobs we're creating here, it's not about money, it's not about equipment. It's about you guys," co-owner Theodore Jones told his workers after a ribbon-cutting ceremony. "That's reflected in our pay, it's reflected in our efforts to train you."

A relaunch of Kni-Co Manufacturing and Magnum Metals comes with the expansion of what had been a 1,000-square-foot facility along the town's truck route to a 4,000-square-foot building with many new machines.

Jones and his wife and partner, Molly, who live in Draper, Utah, purchased Kni-Co from Robert Burns in early 2020. Since then, they've been expanding the facility that largely constructs gas cabinets for the semiconductor industry and a camp stove sold through Cabela's outdoor shops, Bass Pro Shop and similar outlets.

To accomplish this work, they've added new, high-tech machines such as a press brake that bends sheet metal parts, a



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Eric Weaver, a longtime Kni-Co Manufacturing employee, demonstrates how a new, high-tech press brake bends sheet metal Wednesday, May 25, 2022, during the company's grand reopening at its Wallowa facility.

powder-coating (paint) system, an oven to bake on and dry the paint at 400 degrees Fahrenheit, a wash system and several welding stations.

The Joneses plan to remain living in Utah, and Burns will continue as the manager of the Wallowa facility. He purchased Kni-Co from its original owner in 2000 and plans "to be here until he retires," Theodore Jones said.

Top jobs

It's the people of Wallowa

County who Jones is most interested in.

"We really want to promote the culture here because it's about the people," he said. "We can buy more equipment and make more money, but we can't replace great people. We want to build high-performance jobs that people are high-paid and high-skilled."

At present, the hourly wage at Kni-Co starts at \$15 an hour. Jones said that will increase to \$16 an

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— Theodore Jones, co-owner, Kni-Co Manufacturing and Magnum Metals

Stricter groundwater regulations contemplated for Oregon

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon water regulators want to impose stricter rules for drilling new irrigation wells next year to preserve groundwater levels and prevent over-pumping.

A preliminary analysis of available data suggests that little groundwater across the state is available for new allocations, said Ivan Gall, field services division administrator at the state's Water Resources Department.

The goal is to create a policy that's "simple and transparent" and also "protective" of groundwater and senior water rights holders, Gall said at the Thursday,

June 16, meeting of the state's Water Resources Commission, which oversees the department.

The agency plans to hold public outreach workshops about the proposal this summer, following by a "rules advisory committee" to weigh in on potential changes.

Under this timeline, the commission could vote to adopt the new regulations in early 2023.

"It's a very large undertaking, when you look at the issues before us," said Doug Woodcock, OWRD's deputy director of water management.

The agency is on an "ambitious schedule" to revise the rules for permitting new wells, he said. It plans to later deal with other groundwater reforms, such as the

rules for deepening existing wells.

"We're really looking at the groundwater allocation piece and getting that under control," Woodcock said.

Depletion of groundwater has been a growing concern for several areas in Oregon, drawing increased scrutiny to how irrigation uses are regulated.

Traditionally, irrigators have been permitted to tap into aquifers as long as the wells didn't immediately interfere with surface waters, according to OWRD. The agency is now contemplating an approach that would deny permits for new wells where groundwater is over-appropriated or where data is lacking.

Currently, new groundwater

uses may be approved even if there's insufficient information about aquifer appropriation. Under the new regulation, wells would no longer be permitted simply because an area "cannot be determined to be over-appropriated."

During the June 16 meeting, commission members urged OWRD officials to cease approving new wells in areas where the impact to aquifers is unknown — even before the new regulations are finished.

"It's concerning because the existing rules would be the reason for the situation we're in," said Woody Wolfe, a farmer and commissioner.

That sentiment was echoed by Meg Reeves, a retired attorney

and the commission's chair.

"I would be in favor of exploring what can be done in the interim," she said.

Waterwatch of Oregon, an environmental nonprofit, believes that current laws and regulations allow OWRD to "default to no" when wells are proposed in areas with limited groundwater data.

"We don't think there's any new process needed to do this," said Lisa Brown, the nonprofit's attorney.

Brown said her organization appreciates the OWRD's regulatory direction but urged the agency to act quickly.

"We're still seeing those default-to-yes issuances going through the system," she said.