

Idaho reports warm, dry January

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

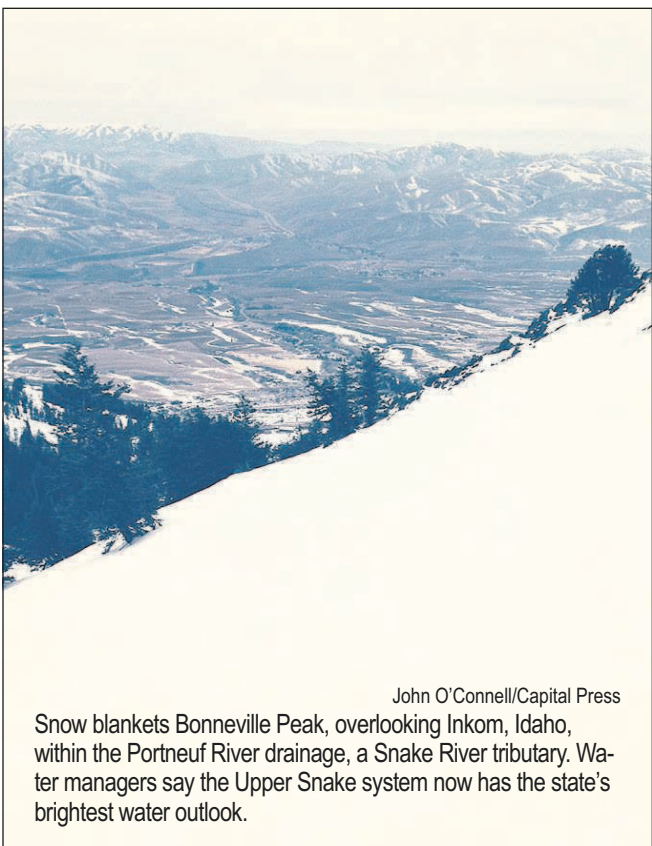
BOISE — January brought Idaho below-average moisture and spring-like temperatures, ranging from 3 to 7 degrees above normal, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Ron Abramovich, Idaho NRCS water supply specialist, said record warmth in January and into February has caused moisture to fall as rain, even up to 8,000 feet in Central Idaho, and has “ripened” snowpack to melt prematurely. He worries without a turn toward colder and wetter weather, snowpack levels will likely fall further behind, and runoff may peak early, at the expense of reservoir fill

“A few of our lower (snow survey) sites started to melt in January,” Abramovich said, adding weather experts anticipate warm conditions will persist.

In February alone, the National Weather Service’s Pocatello field office reported temperatures hovering in the 60s set four records in Pocatello, two in Burley and three in Stanley. Furthermore, nighttime lows have frequently remained above freezing, he said.

Steve Howser, manager of Aberdeen-Springfield Canal Co., said his growers are concerned that high soil moisture and warm temperatures may trigger fall wheat to break dor-



John O'Connell/Capital Press
Snow blankets Bonneville Peak, overlooking Inkom, Idaho, within the Portneuf River drainage, a Snake River tributary. Water managers say the Upper Snake system now has the state’s brightest water outlook.

mancy, which could lead to broad winter kill if more typical winter weather returns.

“This is more like what I expect to see in March,” Howser said.

Arbon Valley farmer Hans Hayden shares Howser’s concern about the potential for winter kill but added snow mold shouldn’t be a problem this season, with no blanket of snow.

Idaho’s January precipitation ranged from 35-85 percent

of normal. Reservoirs are less than a quarter full in the Salmon Falls, Owyhee, Wild Horse, Magic and Oakley basins, where irrigators are bracing for shortages this season. The Upper Snake received 75 percent of normal January precipitation but has 118 percent of normal snow-water equivalent in its snowpack above Palisades Reservoir, helped by wet November and December weather and storm tracks along the Conti-

ental Divide that have nipped its headwaters.

The Bureau of Reclamation is expected to commence in mid-February with flood control releases from the Upper Snake reservoir system, which is about 70 percent full.

“We carried over a lot of water in the reservoirs,” added Alan Hansten, manager for Northside Canal Co. “For the Upper Snake River system, it looks pretty good this year.”

Several Upper Snake water managers have signed up to conduct aquifer recharge with the flood releases

By contrast, Jim Rinfleisch general manager of Big Lost River Irrigation District, is concerned about this season’s supply, with little storage carryover and 75 percent of normal snowpack. He fears a repeat of last season, when he had to cut off water to users below Mackay.

Abromovich said Boise Project irrigators are better off than last year, with 85 percent of normal snowpack. Snowpack is just 50-65 percent of normal in Idaho’s Northern Panhandle.

Idaho stream-flow forecasts decreased in January, projected at just 35 percent of average in Owyhee basin, 70-100 percent of average in west-central, Central and Eastern Idaho, 50-90 percent of average throughout Southern Idaho and 115 percent of average for the Selway and Clearwater River at Orofino

Oregon snowpack report paints dry picture this summer

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

The snowpack in Oregon’s mountain ranges is at or near record-low levels in 40 percent of monitoring sites, which could mean trouble for irrigators, wildlife and water quality this summer.

While total precipitation measured since the start of the Oct. 1 water year is near normal, most of it has fallen as rain instead of snow and won’t be available later in the year. Streams and rivers that depend on snowmelt probably will be running thin this summer, according to the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Some monitoring sites in Oregon’s mountains are snow-free for the first time since measurements began. As of Feb. 1, snow levels at 44 of 110 NRCS monitoring sites were at or near record lows.

It’s the second consecutive year Oregon has reached the peak of winter with a meager snowpack. Major February snowstorms eased the situation last year and snow can drape the mountain ranges in March or April, but relief isn’t in the immediate forecast, said Melissa Webb, an NRCS hydrologist based in Portland.

“We have a month or two for recovery, there’s time for improvement,” Webb said. “That said, across the mountains of the Oregon – the Cascades, Siskiyou, Ochocos

– we are seeing record low snowpack levels.”

Webb said heavy rains that drenched much of the Pacific Northwest this month are a benefit. The rain helps fill reservoirs, stream flows are in good shape and soil moisture has improved. Snow is what the region really needs, she said, but a cold, wet spring would help.

“The later the spring, the better,” Webb said. “If we’re not going to have a normal snowpack, delaying summer heat and snowmelt would be a good thing.”

The NRCS snowpack report said Washington and California also have water supply problems.

In Washington, rain and warm temperatures in the mountains melted some of the snowpack and reduced streamflow forecasts for the coming months. Washington would have to get more than 200 percent of normal snowfall between now and April 1 to “even have a chance of catching up” to typical snowpack levels, according to the NRCS.

In California, where the snowpack’s water content stood at 20 percent of normal in January, Gov. Jerry Brown has already declared a statewide water emergency. The directive orders state officials to help farmers and communities that are economically damaged by drought and to make sure the state can respond to drinking water shortages.

Influx of organic consumers raises marketing questions

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Many new organic consumers have little experience with the organic label and some shoppers think they’re buying organic when they’re actually not, experts say.

“The brand has outsized our actual influence in the marketplace,” said Laura Batcha, executive director of the Organic Trade Association, during the recent Organicology conference in Portland, Ore.

Market research shows that more than one-third of organic consumers have only been buying organic products in the past two years, she said.

This influx of new consumers raises questions about how best market to organic products, Batcha said.

Contrary to the stereotype of organic consumers being whiter, older and higher income than average, they actually tend to be younger and more racially diverse, she said.

“We are on trend with the future demographic of the United States,” Batcha said.

Younger organic buyers have characteristics that don’t

reflect the habits of “seasoned” organic consumers, she said.

For example, older buyers are more committed to traditional organic retail channels, like food cooperatives, while younger people are “non-dominational” when it comes to shopping for organic products and will frequent mainstream grocery stores, Batcha said.

“They don’t attribute a lot of values to it in the same way,” she said.

Market data indicates that roughly 80 percent of families buy some organic food, just not very frequently, Batcha said.

It’s also likely that some consumers think other labels — such as “natural” — connote organic methods, she said.

“Natural has a better frame of reference in our vocabulary,” Batcha said.

Nearly 60 percent of consumers say they look for the “natural” label when shopping for groceries, while less than 50 percent look for the “organic label,” according to a survey by the Consumers Union.

The “natural” label means a product contains no artificial ingredients but doesn’t have

to be produced according to any farm practices regulated by the USDA.

Even so, many consumers assume the “natural” label encompasses organic standards enforced by USDA. Roughly two-thirds believe “natural” food was produced without pesticides, antibiotics, growth

hormones or genetically modified organisms, the survey said.

“Consumers are sometimes choosing natural because they think it means the same thing,” said Urvashi Rangan, director of consumer safety and sustainability for the Consumers Union.

Oregon regulators seek quarantine notification change

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Farm regulators in Oregon want options other than newspapers to notify farmers about quarantines for pests and diseases.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture is asking state lawmakers to change a statute that requires the agency to announce quarantine orders in general circulation newspapers.

Instead, the agency could use “one or more methods” to get the word out to affected members of the public, according to House Bill 2445.

While the legislation would still allow ODA to advertise in newspapers, it could instead notify affected growers directly through emails, social media or the agency’s website, said Lisa Hanson, its deputy director, during a Feb. 10 hearing of the House Committee on Rural Communities, Land Use and Water.

Katy Coba, ODA’s director, noted that groups focused on issues like invasive species have “incredible networks” for communication and electronic methods allow the agency to reach people “with the right tool.”

The agency doesn’t have data to confirm that electron-

ic communications are more effective than newspapers, but computer usage is high among farmers and ranchers in Oregon, she said.

About 80 percent of the farms in Oregon have access to the Internet, compared to 67 percent for the U.S. overall, according to USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service. Oregon, Washington and New Hampshire have the highest rates of farm Internet access in the country.

Rep. Mike McLane, R-Powell Butte, said he would have to spend more time considering the bill because people in rural areas who are affected by an agricultural quarantine may have limited Internet access.

“I’m protective of rural newspapers,” he said. “People still read them. They’re still useful.”

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