

SW Idaho water supply 'marginally adequate'

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — The 2015 irrigation season should be adequate for most farmers in Southwestern Idaho, but only if natural river flows hold up.

"I still think we're OK. The wild card is the river flow," said Greg Curtis, superintendent of Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District, the valley's largest.

Water supply managers said most reservoirs in the region started the season with a decent amount of storage water. However, snowpack levels were well below normal and unusually warm temperatures in February and March caused the snow to melt much quicker than normal.

That resulted in an early bump in river flows, before irrigators need the water. The big question now is how far into the season those flows will hold up, Curtis said.

Most irrigation districts in the region typically get by on natural flow rights well into the summer before switching over to water they have stored in reservoirs.

If river flows drop below a certain level too early in the season, those districts would have to turn to stored water much sooner than normal and that could cause reservoir levels to get depleted quicker.

How the weather fares over the next several months will determine if Pioneer Irrigation District has to reduce deliveries to its 5,800 patrons later in the season, superintendent Mark Zirschky said in a news release. "Spring rains would really



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Water from Pioneer Irrigation District's Phyllis Canal flows by a farm field in Southwestern Idaho April 13. Water supply managers in the region say most farmers should have an adequate supply of water this year, if natural river flows hold up.

help by delaying demands on the system, but ultimately we are going to have to rely on our patrons to be as conservative as possible in their water use to help make our storage water last as long as possible," he said.

Boise Project Board of Control Manager Tim Page said the water supply outlook for the Treasure Valley is "marginally adequate."

The project delivers water to five irrigation districts and 165,000 acres on the Boise River system.

BPBC usually supplies water until the first part of October but whether the project will be able to keep the water flowing beyond September this year depends on how river flows hold up, Page said.

Water from the project started filling canals on April 1 and irrigation deliveries should start

going full-bore about April 15, Curtis said.

Snowpack in the Payette River basin is less than half of normal, but the system's reservoirs are in good shape, said watermaster Ron Shurtleff.

There won't be any surplus water this year, he said, "but we're looking fine."

The Weiser River basin is a different story. Although carry-over in most reservoirs on the system was good, snowpack is only 10 percent of normal.

The Weiser system provides irrigation water for about 55,000 acres.

Those who own storage water rights will probably be OK this year, said watermaster Brandi Horton, but the bulk of the water users in the basin get their water rights from natural stream flow provided by snowpack.

Farm groups split on grass seed reporting

Bill would authorize production data collection

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Legislation that would empower Oregon farm regulators to collect data about grass seed supplies has divided ag groups, which see it as either a market stabilizer or intrusive.

The Oregon Grass Seed Bargaining Association supports House Bill 3435, which authorizes the Oregon Department of Agriculture to gather information on grass seed inventories from licensed dealers.

Knowledge encourages market discipline, as farmers can adjust their production to prevent shortages and surpluses, said Mark Simmons, executive director of OGSBA.

"Data is not a silver bullet but it will allow us to react more quickly to change," he said during recent legislative hearings on the bill.

Better data would have helped the industry weather the plunge in demand for grass seed after the housing collapse and financial crisis in 2008 and 2009, Simmons said.

The USDA's statistics branch doesn't collect data about grass seed and information from state seed commissions only provides a "rear-view mirror," he said.

Seed contracts were tightened up by lawmakers in 2011 with legislation that established deadlines for payment after harvest.

Before then, grass seed farmers often held the crop for years without getting paid, which put some growers out of business but did not provide dealers with an incentive to manage production, said Simmons.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

A forklift operator moves grass seed products at an Oregon warehouse. Lawmakers are considering legislation that would require seed dealers to report inventories to state farm regulators.

HB 3435 serves as a natural extension of that legislation, he said.

Now that dealers must pay for contracted seed, improved transparency would mitigate the industry's boom-and-bust cycles, he said.

However, ODA does not currently have the legal authority to collect supply information from dealers, Simmons said.

The Oregon Seed Council, which represents dealers and growers, is opposed to the bill because the industry can voluntarily share information to promote market stability, said Roger Beyer, the group's executive director.

"Let us solve it internally," Beyer said.

Data collected by Oregon State University about grass seed production is accurate and can be used to extrapolate inventories, he said.

Growers and dealers can figure out how to reconcile the information they're already gathering without ODA's intervention, which is unnecessary and lacks industry consensus, Beyer said.

"A lot of people feel it's not the role of government to be calculating private information about seed companies," he said.

The Oregon Farm Bureau is against HB 3435 for the same reason, said Jenny Dresler, government affairs associate for the group.

"It doesn't need a legislative fix," she said.

The bill would only apply to contracted acreage in Oregon, which does not represent the entire grass seed supply, she said. "It would not give the full picture."

Owl conservation plans aid companies

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

Upgrading the Northern spotted owl to "endangered" status may bring more scrutiny to timber sales on public land but probably won't effect companies that already have owl conservation plans in place, experts say.

The Environmental Protection Information Center, based in Arcata, Calif., asked that spotted owls be reclassified as endangered. The group said the owl's status has not improved in the past 25 years due to habitat loss and competition from larger, more aggressive barred owls. The group believes enhanced protection is necessary.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which enforces the federal Endangered Species Act, agreed a review is warranted and will do that over the next year.

While that process would seem to carry the threat of increased regulation, most major timber companies already have federally-approved spotted owl Habitat Conservation Plans (HCP) in place, said

Gary Rynearson, forest policy and communications manager for Green Diamond Resources.

The company owns timberland in Washington, Oregon and principally in Northern California, including 400,000 acres covered by an HCP. Such plans detail how logging and other activity can be carried out in areas inhabited by spotted owls.

"We don't think an uplisting would have an impact on us," Rynearson said. "Our protection measures are in place. We have a long history of understanding how we manage for owls across the landscape."

Among other things, Green Diamond pioneered barred owl removal research with approval from Fish and Wildlife. The work showed spotted owls returned to nesting sites in nearly every instance when barred owls were killed. The work is controversial — killing one species to benefit another — but it convinced USFWS to experiment with barred owl removal in other West Coast forests.

Tom Wheeler, legal coordinator for the Environmental Protection Information Center,

agreed with Green Diamond's assessment that HCPs probably protect timber companies from additional regulation. He believes the "jury is still out" on whether they improve conditions for spotted owls, however.

The group has an "evolving" position on barred owl removal, Wheeler said. "We can't shoot our way out of this problem," he said, but as an interim strategy it may be necessary to help spotted owls recover.

The bird's population throughout its range is declining 2.9 percent per year, with up to a 5.9 percent annual decline in some areas.

The Northern spotted owl is the ESA poster creature. It's been listed as "threatened" since 1990, a decision many link to the steep decline of the timber industry in the Pacific Northwest and the decimation of rural towns that once depended on logging and mill jobs.

Logging on federal land plummeted sharply from the mid-1980s on as timber sale lawsuits, protests and policy changes unfolded.



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