

Drought

Water managers respond to Yakima Basin drought

Reservoirs tapped early; irrigation districts cut supply

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

The drought has taken hold in Washington state's Yakima Basin, with federal managers tapping reservoirs much earlier than usual and one irrigation district restricting water supplies.

"We're just hoping for rain right now. Give us some rain. That will improve the situation," the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Yakima River operations supervisor, Chuck Garner, said.

The bureau forecast Tuesday that Yakima-area growers with junior water rights will receive 54 percent of their normal supplies. Growers with senior water rights are expected to receive 100 percent of their supplies.

The outlook has been worsening since early March, when the bureau estimated junior-right holders would receive 73 percent of their normal supplies.

Low-elevation snow is gone, and precipitation at the basin's five major reservoirs has been one-third of average so far in April.

With the natural Yakima River flow far below normal, the bureau began drawing from the reservoirs on April 15, 10 weeks earlier than normal.

Garner said it's probably the earliest the bureau has started spending down water stored over the winter since the severe 1977 drought.

On Tuesday, water was trickling into the reservoirs about half as fast as normal, according to the bureau. Meanwhile, water was being released almost twice as fast as usual.

The reservoirs are 99 percent full and hold more than 1 million acre-feet, a robust figure for this time of year. But with the early start to the drawdown, the bureau projects that by the end of

the September, the reservoirs will hold only 110,000 acre-feet, compared to the usual 320,000 acre-feet.

That would leave little water held over for the bureau to build on for the 2016 irrigation season.

The Roza Irrigation District, which has 72,000 acres to water, responded Monday by cutting water supplies to 1.8 gallons per minute, instead of the usual amount of roughly 7.5 gallons per minute.

"It's a significant reduction, to the point where some growers will have trouble with their pumps," the district's manager, Scott Revell, said.

The district's board may have a special meeting next week to discuss whether to pursue potentially expensive water from senior right holders in the Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District.

The district has set aside \$3.5 million to lease water



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Chris Sandvig, dam tender for Kittitas Reclamation District, looks west from Lake Easton Dam. It's where the district's irrigation canal starts. There's plenty of water now but probably won't be by mid-summer.

in drought years. The district must decide whether to invest funds now, or hold back to guard against the possibility of an even worse water shortage in 2016. Revell called the 54 percent supply figure "right on the decision-making line."

Also, the district is watching to see what state lawmakers do. During the

2005 drought, the state and Roza split 50-50 the cost of leasing water. The Washington Department of Ecology has requested \$4 million for leasing water in the Yakima Basin, but state lawmakers have not committed the money.

The Kittitas Reclamation District has a different strategy for coping with the drought. Manager Ken

Hasbrouck said the district plans to keep water flowing at nearly normal levels through May to protect hay, the district's "moneymaker."

After that, water supplies will be ramped down, he said. Usually, the district provides water until Oct. 15. During the 2005 drought, water was gone by Aug. 5.

This year? "Right now, I would hate to even suggest a date," Hasbrouck said.

He also said it's hard to forecast economic loss. Growers who suffer a water shortage may need a year or two to get their land and livestock back in shape, he said.

The bureau's water supply forecast assumes precipitation going forward will be 80 percent of normal.

"I'm really hoping that 54 number we're working with is a number that stays in place," Hasbrouck said. "Let it rain, and I'll be happy."



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Pasture is irrigated in Firth, Idaho, with a snowcapped mountain in the backdrop. Below-average snowpack, an early start to the irrigation season and a poor outlook for natural river flows have led to an 89,000 acre foot obligation for groundwater users in the Surface Water Coalition water call.

Idaho well users owe large surface call obligation

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

Southern Idaho groundwater irrigators now face their largest obligation in the 10-year history of the Surface Water Coalition's delivery call and fear they may fall short in their efforts to provide mitigation.

Coalition members — American Falls Reservoir District No. 2, Twin Falls Canal Co., A&B Irrigation District, Burley Irrigation District, Milner Irrigation District, Minidoka Irrigation District and North Side Canal Co. — say springs that supplement surface flows in Snake River reaches between Blackfoot and Milner Dam have declined as a result of well irrigation.

Idaho Department of Water Resources Director Gary Spackman recently ordered the groundwater users to provide 89,000 acre-feet of water by May 1 to offset injuries to AFRD No. 2 and Twin Falls Canal Co.

Absent a sudden shift toward wetter weather nullify-

ing the debt, any shortfall in mitigating for the full amount would result in curtailment of well users with the most junior water rights.

Lynn Tominaga, executive director for Idaho Ground Water Appropriators Inc., said he's been out "begging for water" and has found little.

"It's very doubtful we'll get to 89,000 acre-feet," Tominaga said.

Tominaga believes the obligation is excessive, contending the water outlook was bleaker in 2010, when IGWA owed just 84,000 acre-feet. That year, wet summer weather arrived, and IGWA's \$1.3 million water investment went to waste.

Furthermore, Tominaga questions the Bureau of Reclamation's allocation of 100,000 acre-feet of water to augment flows for salmon health this season, as per an agreement with the Nez Perce Tribe. Tominaga noted salmon flow augmentation heightens competition for storage water.

IDWR Deputy Director

Mat Weaver said the 100,000 acre-feet was on the borderline of being necessary, and no augmentation would have been required under Reclamation's formula had the agency's water supply forecast been just 1 percent lower.

As for the discrepancy with 2010, Weaver explained IDWR has implemented a new methodology to calculate diminishing reach gains, in compliance with a court order.

Another policy change this season allows Spackman to revisit the water supply in mid-season and further increase IGWA's obligation, if necessary.

"I think the day is coming where groundwater pumpers may have to do what surface irrigators have had to do for years and do some things to preserve their water. That probably means crop selection and better management," said Stan Hawkins, a member of the Upper Snake River Basin's Committee of Nine, representing the Great Feeder Canal Co. "In a year like this, we've got lots of canals that I represent that simply cannot count on having enough water to raise a crop of corn or a crop of potatoes."

Ruling forces California water districts to review rates

By BRIAN MELLEY
AND FENIT NIRAPPIL
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — An appeals court decision striking down punitive water pricing that was intended to encourage conservation had water agencies reviewing rates Tuesday and some residents exploring whether to bring similar challenges.

The ruling Monday that found San Juan Capistrano's water rates unconstitutional came amid a severe drought as agencies try to meet the governor's mandate to cut water use statewide by 25 percent.

The 4th District Court of Appeal said charging heavy users incrementally more per gallon without showing it cost more violated a 1996 voter-approved law that prohibits government agencies from overcharging for services.

The decision that Gov. Jerry Brown said puts a "straitjacket" on local government makes it harder for cities to adopt similar billings and may bring down some of the higher rates, said Ken Baerenklau, an associate professor at the University of California, Riverside who has studied tiered water rates.

Water departments are being pulled in different directions by Brown's administration that demanded hitting residents in the pocketbook to save water and the legal uncertainty of charging guzzlers higher rates.

"If you have courts telling you one thing and governor telling you something else, maybe that's a reason to sit tight," he said.

Water districts were carefully going over the ruling to figure out if their rates were in jeopardy or how they could develop a pricing scheme that would encourage conservation but not



Brian Melley/Associated Press

This Sunday, April 19, 2015 photo shows Kris Widger mountain biking through dry vegetation in the Santa Monica Mountains in the Topanga area of Los Angeles. An appeals court Tuesday struck down a water pricing scheme meant to conserve water.

violate the ruling.

Huntington Beach, for example, had been considering adding tiered water rates for years, but didn't know how to figure out what would be legal until the ruling came out, said Public Works Director Travis Hopkins.

The Crescenta Valley Water District was meeting Tuesday night and was expected to discuss the ruling's impact on its four-tier pricing and future rate hikes, said attorney Thomas Bunn.

"This is going to force a number of districts to re-examine their tiered rates and make sure they're justified," Bunn said.

Two-thirds of water districts use some form of tiered water pricing. The ruling which is only binding in Orange County but could be cited in legal filings throughout the state, does not make tiered pricing illegal, but agencies or cities have to show price hikes are directly tied to the cost of the water, the court said.

Noting that Santa Barbara is reviving a desalination plant, Justice William Bedsworth

wrote that providing water during a drought is pricey and nothing in the voter-approved ballot measure prevents water agencies from passing those costs on to users.

"That would seem like a good idea," he wrote.

San Juan Capistrano charged nearly four times as much per unit of water for users in the highest tier to provide an incentive to conserve, but failed to show that the water was that expensive to deliver. Residents complained the higher rates were arbitrary and unfair.

Nearby Santa Margarita Water District watched the case closely and updated its increased tiered rates in March that carefully documented the link between costs and rates in a 120-page analysis, spokesman Jonathan Volzke said.

Attorney Benjamin Benumof, who brought the lawsuit against San Juan Capistrano and has suits pending against Sweetwater Authority in San Diego County and Glendale Water and Power, said he thinks there are a lot of places where rates are out of line with the court order.

Drought declared in 2 more Oregon counties

SALEM (AP) — Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has declared drought emergencies in two

more counties — Baker and Wheeler — due to drought, low snowpack levels and low water conditions.

The governor's action Monday brings to seven the number of counties where the state has declared a drought emergency so far this year. The other counties are Crook, Harney, Klamath, Malheur and Lake. In 2014, a total of nine counties were under drought emergencies.

The counties asked the state to take action, and the Oregon Drought Council considered the

requests by weighing current water conditions, future forecasts and agricultural impacts. Drought continues to have significant impacts on agriculture, livestock and natural resources in each of the counties.

The governor's declaration allows increased flexibility in how water is managed to ensure that limited supplies are used as efficiently as possible. Brown is also working with Oregon's federal delegation, state agencies and local governments to address drought issues.

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