

Drought

Idaho irrigation shortages predicted after dry April

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BOISE — Irrigation shortages are expected throughout Southern and Central Idaho following a dry and warm April, according to a Natural Resources Conservation Service report.

NRCS water supply specialist Ron Abramovich said the Owyhee Basin in Western Idaho and low-elevation mountains in Eastern Idaho, including the Portneuf, Willow and Blackfoot basins, received about 90 percent of normal April precipitation. Precipitation ranged from 40 to 75 percent of normal for the month in the rest of the state, Abramovich said.

Abramovich said Idaho snowpack levels peaked on March 1, a month earlier than



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Potatoes are planted along the banks of the American Falls Reservoir in southeast Idaho. Water officials anticipate widespread shortages this summer following another month of hot and dry weather in April.

normal, and current snowpack levels are more appropriate for early June.

He said March and April temperatures were high enough to gradually melt much of the state's mid-elevation

snowpack and even some high-elevation snowpack, causing moisture to gradually seep into the ground rather than pouring into streams and filling reservoirs, as occurs when warm May weather

"ripens" the snowpack.

Lyle Swank, watermaster for the Upper Snake reservoir system, which is at 83 percent of capacity, said many of his users have experienced record early season demand.

"Everything is early," Swank said. "The ground dried out early. The farmers planted early in some cases. The runoff is early. Demand is early."

Swank said many irrigation companies are still optimistic about making it through the full season, but the supply outlook has gotten much tighter than it was just a couple of months ago.

The report shows streams throughout Southern Idaho have already reached peak flows and dropped to summer base-flow levels. Drainages

in the Wood and Lost basins are near record-low levels, ranging from 1 to 35 percent of normal streamflow forecasts for May through July. Streamflow forecasts for the three-month period range from 10 to 20 percent of average in the Owyhee, Salmon Falls, Bruneau and Oakley basins.

NRCS predicts agricultural shortages in the Big Wood, Little Wood, Big Lost, Little Lost, Oakley, Salmon Falls and Owyhee basins, as well as the Upper Snake River.

The Payette reservoir system is 90 percent full and the Boise reservoir system is 88 percent full. Abramovich said Boise River irrigators are operating in "conservation" mode, having reduced deliveries from the usual 4

acre-feet to 1.6 acre-feet. He said irrigators who draw from Magic Reservoir near Shoshone ran out of water in July last year, and this season's supply should be shorter. Irrigators who draw from Owyhee Reservoir, which has peaked at 21 percent full, should also run out of water earlier than last year, Abramovich said.

Salmon Falls Reservoir reached its peak storage on April 19 and is 18 percent full. Oakley Reservoir is 30 percent full.

Alan Hansten, manager of Northside Canal Co. in Jerome, said he's already cut back his deliveries to 90 percent of normal.

"I think we'll probably be able to make it into September," Hansten said. "Beyond that is a crap shoot now."

Yakima Basin farmers may soon get access to drought wells

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

LACEY, Wash. — The Washington Department of Ecology may issue permits for emergency wells in the drought-stricken Yakima Basin in the next couple of weeks, earlier than expected and an acknowledgment by the agency that farmers there are facing a crisis.

The agency has previously said it would not allow pumping from the wells until it had leased an equal amount of surface water to return to streams to balance drawing groundwater from watersheds.

But events are moving too fast to wait for lawmakers to appropriate drought relief funds or for the agency to acquire water, DOE drought coordinator Jeff Marti said Friday.

Roza Irrigation District's decision this week to cut off water for at least 15 days beginning Monday pushed DOE to rethink its approach, he said.

About 90 percent of the state's roughly 110 emergency drought wells are in the Roza district.

"They're at a moment of crisis, and we have to take action now to meet their needs," Marti said.

DOE has requested \$4 million to purchase water in the Yakima Basin. Legislators, wrapped up in prolonged budget negotiations on all state programs, have not acted. Instead of waiting, DOE plans to borrow \$1.5 million to \$3 million from other programs to acquire compensating water.

DOE still will pursue surface water to compensate for



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Washington Department of Ecology drought coordinator Jeff Marti listens during a meeting May 8 at the agency's headquarters in Lacey. Marti says the state is speeding up its response to the rapidly developing drought.

pumping from emergency wells, Marti said.

"We want to respect the needs of other users in the long run," he said.

DOE has come under criticism from some lawmakers who said the department should go ahead and allow the wells to be used. Farmers paid for the wells and have received state approval to draw from them in previous droughts, lawmakers said.

Roza district manager Scott Revell said farmers need the wells now and will need them before the end of the summer, when the district anticipates stopping water deliveries earlier than usual.

"I think the demand is extreme," he said. "People are going to need water after we shutoff."

DOE says it must consult with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and Yakima Nation before issuing permits. DOE spokesman Dan Partridge said the agency is working with those agencies. "We're putting things in place for this to happen," he said.

Irrigators cope as streamflow forecasts drop

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

SUNNYSIDE, Wash. — The Roza Irrigation District, serving 72,000 acres in the Yakima Valley, has begun a temporary shutdown of its system to save water for summer drought.

The Roza is trying to lease water from other districts and is eager for state permission to use emergency wells.

The latest indication of the severity of Washington's drought is a May 1 forecast of summer streamflows by the Washington Snow Survey Office of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Mount Vernon. Many of them are historic lows from light winter snowpack in the Cascade Mountains.

The Yakima River, which feeds the Roza, is projected at 25 percent of normal flow at Cle Elum for May through September.

The Roza is entitled to 375,000 acre-feet of water and uses about 300,000 in a season. This year, Scott Revell, district manager, hopes for 150,000.

The Roza is a junior water right district, subject to first restrictions. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has estimated the Yakima Basin will get 47 percent of normal supply. But that's based on normal precipitation, which isn't happening. Revell is planning for 38 percent of normal supply.

He expects to save 14,000 acre-feet of water with a three-week shutdown of the system. The district has budgeted \$1.2 million to lease 5,000 acre-feet from other irrigation districts at \$500 per acre. Emergency drought wells, already in place but awaiting state funding to activate, hopefully



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

A snowy Mt. Cashmere in the background, the Wenatchee River and Wenatchee Reclamation District's Highline Canal meander down from the town of Dryden, Wash., on May 7. Pear orchards are in lower left and center. River and canal are full but won't be in late summer due to drought.

will supply another 7,000, he said.

All of that, he said, is relatively small compared with the total need.

There are about 110 emergency drought wells in the Yakima Basin with 90 percent of them in the Roza, Revell said.

"People with the wells have needed them since April 20 when we cut back 75 percent of our water," he said. "They need them now for the shutdown and when the season ends."

Landowners own the wells but they need state Department of Ecology permission to use them. They also are waiting on legislative approval of funding to lease or buy water that then isn't used elsewhere to offset what they draw from the wells. They can use the wells to maintain 70 percent of normal supply.

"Anyone with emergency drought wells needs to submit pre-application forms so they are ready to go when DOE is

ready to go," Revell said.

Roza's 95-mile main canal diverts from the Yakima River at Roza Dam in Yakima Canyon between Ellensburg and Yakima. The diversion gate began closing at 7 a.m. May 11.

It takes four days for irrigators to use the water in the canal and 350 miles of laterals.

Each day of shutdown saves about 800 acre-feet of water and the plan is to save enough to extend service in July and August. Revell estimates total district crop losses and costs of coping with the drought in tens of millions of dollars.

Revell is working to lease water from landowners in the Sunnyside Valley, Yakima Tieton, Naches Selah and other districts.

Several hundred acres were signed up in the Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District as of May 12, he said.

The SVID and Naches

Selah have expressed willingness but say they may not have 5,000 acres to lease.

"We've done it before and as long as it doesn't harm our overall needs the board is willing," said Justin Harter, manager of Naches Selah.

"We have fewer potential acres than in 2005 (the last drought) because of more permanent crops, apples and cherries, now," he said.

The district diverts from the Naches River, has some storage in Bumping Lake and serves 11,000 acres from Naches to Selah, 80 percent of which is tree fruit. It is mostly senior rights and isn't anticipating rationing, Harter said.

The Yakima Tieton Irrigation District began water deliveries April 1 at its normal rate of 4.9 gallons per minute and should be able to sustain that because it has a highly efficient mostly pressurized pipe system, said Rick Dieker, manager.

Agreement reached to stabilize Snake aquifer

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BOISE — Surface Water Coalition members and Idaho groundwater users have reached an agreement that should avoid widespread well curtailments this season while requiring pumpers to make longterm sacrifices to stabilize a declining aquifer.

Beginning in the 2016 irrigation season, Idaho Ground Water Appropriators members will be asked to curb their groundwater use by 13.1 percent, for an annual savings of 240,000 acre-feet when averaged over several seasons. The exact numbers may be tweaked as needed.

Combined with another 250,000 acre-feet of so-called recharge water the state will allow to seep into the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer through unlined canals or injection wells, officials hope the agreement will be sufficient to reverse declining groundwater levels.

The agreement also calls on IGWA to provide a flat 50,000 acre-feet of mitigation water each season, as opposed to the current system that may require nothing of it in wet years but steep debts

during drought years, such as this season.

Surface Water Coalition attorney John Simpson said several details must be worked out before the agreement is finalized later this summer, but it should make Idaho water management more sustainable.

"This year was kind of a threshold year where peo-

ple finally got together and everyone realized unless we want to see curtailment every year going forward to some level, we need to start doing something about it," Simpson said.

Negotiations toward a longterm solution started after groundwater irrigators were unable to acquire 89,000 acre-feet of mitigation water,

which the Idaho Department of Water Resources ordered due by May 1 to resolve this season's obligations under the Coalition's decade-old

water call. The call was filed in response to declining spring flows into a reach of the Snake River, caused by groundwater pumping.

Curtailments would have devastated a large portion of Idaho's 850,000 groundwater-irrigated acres, some cities and industry.

Celebrating 75 Years Conserving the Idaho Way

LOW INTEREST LOANS FOR IDAHO SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION

Sprinkler Irrigation, No-Till Drills, Fences
Livestock Feeding Operations
Solar Stock Water Pump Systems

2.5%-3.5% Terms 7-15 Years Up to \$200,000

IDAHO CONSERVATION LOAN PROGRAM

swc.idaho.gov | 208-332-1790

OBC NORTHWEST, INC.
Nursery & Greenhouse Supplies

60 YEARS 1954-2014

Everything you need to grow!

- Greenhouses • Mulch Film • Shade Cloth
- Frost Protection Blankets • Agrifabric
- Organic Soil Mix (OMRI listed)

Greenhouse Air Circulator

Nico-Shade Fabric

EARTHPOTS
LIVE HEALTHY PLANT HEALTHY

12" GSSV512	20" GSSV520
Reg. \$175	Reg. \$256.67
Sale \$159.00	Sale \$219.00

Call 800-477-4744 or visit obcnw.com
1076 SW Berg Parkway, Canby, Oregon 97013
Licensed & Bonded • License #127055 (OR) • OBCNO1 H022CR (WA)