

Drought

Moisture could help Idaho groundwater users

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

TWIN FALLS, Idaho — Idaho Ground Water Appropriators Inc., Executive Director Lynn Tominaga is hopeful that recent rains may erase a debt his members owe this season in response to the Surface Water Coalition’s delivery call.

On April 1, in the midst of a long period of unseasonably warm, dry weather, Idaho Department of Water Resources Director Gary Spackman ruled Eastern Snake Plain groundwater users owe two Coalition canal companies 89,000 acre feet this season under the amended methodology order for the decade-old call. The Coalition filed the call based on declining spring flows into the Snake River, caused by wells with junior groundwater rights.

When IGWA couldn’t find the necessary mitigation water in time to meet this season’s obligation, it reached a tentative, longterm agreement with the Coalition earlier this month.

It offered 110,000 acre feet in mitigation this season, concerned continued dry weather would otherwise prompt Spackman to increase the obligation at mid-season and require IGWA to provide a minimum reservoir storage carryover after the season.

IGWA also agreed to reduce its groundwater consumption in the future and to pay a flat mitigation amount each year, regardless of the moisture outlook.

But May brought 4 to 6 inches of rain throughout Southern Idaho and changed the outlook. Now, Tominaga is hopeful Spackman may reduce or eliminate the original 89,000-acre-foot obligation. Mitigation water should be much easier to find if the debt remains, though Tominaga fears IGWA’s leased water would flow through the system unused.

“The longer this rainy weather hangs on, the more it looks like Palisades and the other major reservoirs are going to fill,” Tominaga said. “If we have a full reservoir system, our obligation should go away.”

However, as Tominaga travels the state meeting with IGWA groundwater districts, he’s encouraging his members not to let a shift toward wetter weather deter them from pressing forward with a longterm agreement.

Ron Abramovich, water supply specialist with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, said Northern Idaho had received just a third of its usual May precipitation through May 26, but basins further south were inundated with moisture. The Little Wood, Big Lost and Little lost basins received 130 percent of normal precipitation; the Willow, Blackfoot and Portneuf basins in Eastern Idaho were at 185 percent of normal, as were the Salmon Falls and Bruneau basins near the Nevada border, and the Bear River basin was at 166 percent of normal.

Abramovich said stream-flow forecasts, which didn’t change much following the first week of rain, as moisture soaked into dry soils, have come up considerably more recently. Willow Creek near Ririe, for example, had a forecast for 20 percent of normal stream flow through July on April 1, which has increased to 45 percent of normal.

“With the rain and stream flows coming up, we know irrigation demand is going down some,” Abramovich said. “That’s allowing more water to be stored in reservoirs for use later this summer when we’re more likely to be dry.”

Abramovich said sunny, warmer weather should return on Saturday, when the forecast calls for a 90-degree high in Treasure Valley, about 14 degrees above normal.

Some fear SJ Valley ag could go the way of timber industry

Analysis

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

FRESNO — Is agriculture in the iconic San Joaquin Valley going the way of California’s once-abundant timber industry?

As nearly 1 million acres of farmland could be followed this summer because of drought-related water shortages, some farmers are beginning to draw comparisons with the wood products industry, whose decline was hastened by protections for the Northern spotted owl.

Jay Gillette, a Dinuba, Calif., orange grower and packer who’s received no federal water for the past two seasons, fears that agriculture in the region is in a “new normal” of water shortages, farmland being taken out of production and farm-worker layoffs.

“I think we’re there. I think this summer is it,” Gillette said. “I’ve pushed out 30 percent of my home ranch this year. My brother pushed out half his orchard. As volume goes down, if there’s less fruit to pick and pack, it’s going to require less labor to do it.”

Farm layoffs and processing plant closures could rekindle memories of lumber mill shutdowns after the spotted owl’s 1990 listing as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Since then, more than 80 sawmills have closed in California alone because of various factors, including the spotted owl. In 1978, more than 4.4 billion board-feet of lumber valued at \$699 million was produced in California, according to state Board of Equalization tax records. In 2009, in the heart of the Great Recession, only 805 million board-feet was produced



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Jay Gillette, owner of Gillette Citrus Co., in Dinuba, Calif., stands near a downed orange tree in his orchard in late April. Many farmers in the San Joaquin Valley fear water shortages are the “new normal” for the region.

with a value of \$99 million.

“When it comes to these kinds of issues, when you get to court, the environment trumps people and jobs every time,” said Mark Pawlicki, spokesman for the Anderson, Calif.-based Sierra Pacific Industries. “That’s what we’ve learned.”

Since the early 1990s, Central Valley Project water allocations to farmers south of the Delta have declined with each new environmental protection — from winter run salmon temperature controls in the San Joaquin River to biological opinions further protecting salmon

and the Delta smelt, grower groups say.

Among San Joaquin Valley commodities that have suffered a similar fate to timber is cotton. California has gone from 1.6 million acres of cotton in the 1980s to somewhere between 150,000 and 170,000 acres this year, largely because of a steady drop of water supplies from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, said Roger Isom, who runs a trio of organizations for nut and cotton growers and processors.

Amid the drought, the Central Valley Project has shut off

agricultural water to junior rights holders, including the prime citrus growing region in Fresno, Tulare and Kings counties, for the second straight year. California Citrus Mutual has estimated as many as 50,000 acres of orchards could be removed as a result of the zero allocation.

“We’re in a situation that’s never been seen before,” said Ryan Jacobsen, executive director of the Fresno County Farm Bureau. “It’s worse than we ever probably thought possible.”

However, the difference between timber and ag in the valley is the water can come

back, Pawlicki said.

“We can have rains again,” he said. “With the spotted owl, there are many other factors that have kept its population from increasing ... The rains returning will make a big difference.”

Arlen Miller, an Oroquieta, Calif., orange grower, agrees. While wood can be purchased from elsewhere, many fruits and vegetables grown in the valley can’t, he said.

“What we’re going through right now is a drought,” Miller said. “It’s not a man-made drought ... We are subject to the rain.”

Extra days may be added to Owyhee Project water season

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — Recent rainstorms have bought farmers in Eastern Oregon who get their water from the Owyhee Project a little more time this year, but not much.

“It sure hasn’t hurt but it hasn’t done a whole lot of good either,” said dairyman Frank Ausman, a member of the Owyhee Irrigation District’s board of directors.

The region has been hit by four straight years of drought conditions and the 1,800 farms that get their irrigation water from the project had their annual allotment slashed to 1.5 acre-feet this year, well below the normal 4 acre-feet.

There are 158,000 acre-feet of water stored in the project’s reservoir system available for irrigation right now, slightly more than this time last year but well below the 30-year average of 500,000 acre-feet, said OID Manager Jay Chamberlin.

OID hopes the water will last until the first



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

A wheat field near Nyssa, Ore., is irrigated May 26. A recent string of rainstorms may add 7-10 days to the irrigation season for farmers who get their water from the Owyhee Project in Eastern Oregon.

week of August, which is how long it lasted in 2014 but two months earlier than normal.

The recent rains helped reduce demand and might

add another 7-10 days to the end of the water season, Chamberlin said.

The rains weren’t a game-changer but they did help, he said.

“At least we picked up some (water) and we’re grateful for that,” he said. “They are little blessings along the way.”

The storms were hard on some hay fields and reduced their quality significantly, Chamberlin said, “but I don’t hear a lot of complaining because of the seriousness of the situation. The positive is greater than the negative.”

For farmers who are trying to barely get by with the relatively small amount of water they will get this year, those extra days “might make all the difference in the world,” said Oregon State University Cropping Systems Extension Agent Stuart Reitz.

Onion farmer Reid Saito

said the rains have interfered with the later season planting of some crops and threw off the timing of some fertilizing and weed control activities.

“But it’s been welcomed rain,” he said. “Anything we can get that adds to the end of the season is going to help a lot of guys.”

Like last year, a lot of farmers in the region left ground idle this year and planted more crops that require less water, such as grains, peas and dry beans.

Besides leaving some ground idle, Ausman also planted the shortest-day corn he could find and planted it early, hoping to stretch his water into August.

If it gets down to crunch time, “I might let some of my hay suffer because I can buy hay from somewhere else if I have to, but ... I have a dairy and I have to have corn,” he said.

Governor declares drought in 8 Oregon counties

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — Gov. Kate Brown has issued drought declarations for eight more Oregon counties, bringing the total to 15.

The action allows increased flexibility in how water is managed to ensure that limited supplies are used as efficiently as possible.

Brown said May 22 that hot, dry weather this summer will likely lead to a difficult fire season and water shortages.

It applies to eight counties in central, southern and eastern Oregon. They are Deschutes, Grant, Jackson, Josephine, Lane, Morrow, Umatilla and Wasco counties.

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