

Oregon's \$10 million water fund rules approved

Project developers are expected to begin applying for funds

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

Aspiring developers of Oregon water projects will soon be able to request financial assistance from the state government's \$10 million water supply fund.

The Oregon Water Resources Commission has approved final rules for the fund's operation, which means water regulators expect to begin accepting proposals this summer from developers who hope to win project funding in the spring of 2016.

"I think we have a really good start here," said April Snell, executive director of the Oregon Water Resources Commission, during the June 19 commission meeting.

The rules aren't perfect as they required compromises from a multitude of stakeholders, and will probably require "tweaks" as the water supply development fund becomes functional, she said.

"In particular, it's the storage piece we will have to have more discussions about," Snell said.

Storage projects are more controversial than water conservation but

Experts: Dry soils will impede drought recovery

Water must first saturate soil before filling reservoirs

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

The ongoing drought has highlighted the need for increased water supplies in Oregon, but low soil moisture poses a major impediment to water storage, experts say.

Even if Oregon experiences healthy precipitation and snowfall in the future, it will take years to refill some reservoirs because water will first be absorbed by the thirsty soil, experts say.

"That's the first place it's going to go," said Margaret Matter, water resource specialist with the Oregon Department of Agriculture. "Once you get the soils resaturat-

ed, there's nowhere for water to go but down the channel."

Soils dried rapidly in June, leading to an extremely low level of moisture before summer even began, said Scott Oviatt, state snow survey supervisor for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"We're seeing conditions that are typical of July or August," he said during a recent meeting of the Oregon Water Resources Commission.

Snow at the mid-elevation level, which is critical for stream flows, melted early in the year, he said. "What snow did accumulate was mostly at the higher elevations."

The current "El Nino" cycle of warm temperatures in the Pacific Ocean is likely to persist through the coming winter, which bodes for more mild weather in the Northwest, said David Rupp, re-

search associate at Oregon State University's Oregon Climate Change Research Institute.

The situation would be aggravated if the "blob" of warm temperatures in the north Pacific — which deflected storms from the region — does not dissipate, he said.

There's no evidence that El Nino cycles are more frequent due to increased greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, Rupp said.

However, it stands to reason that El Nino's effects would be more pronounced if temperatures get higher, he said.

In some years, natural variability may counteract the overall warming trend, but in the long-term it's unlikely the region will be getting more snow, Rupp said.

"The year we're seeing this year, which is not normal, will be normal by 2050," he said.

are necessary in light of the state's dire water situation, she said.

The \$10 million fund was created by Oregon lawmakers in 2013 but the grants and loans could not be dispensed until task forces representing diverse interests agreed on underlying

concepts for its operation.

The process was further delayed because former Gov. John Kitzhaber missed a deadline for appointing the task forces, which did not begin negotiations until last summer.

After a deal was hammered out

earlier this year, the concepts were incorporated into proposed rules by the Oregon Water Resources Department, which offered them up for public comment before submitting them to the commission for final approval.

One of the most contentious as-

pects of the fund's operation was the determination of "seasonally varying flows," or how much water can be withdrawn from streams during periods of heavy flow.

Storage projects that win grants must also release 25 percent of their water for in-stream environmental benefits.

It was ultimately decided that projects will be subject to a "matrix," under which those with the largest environmental impact and least amount of stream data would be subject to the most scrutiny.

Under the rules recently adopted by the commission, the Oregon Water Resources Department can conduct the "seasonally varying flow" analysis on projects that are approved for funding.

However, project developers with sufficient information can complete this step before they even apply for funding, said Tracy Loudon, senior policy coordinator for the agency.

Proposed projects will be ranked by a technical review team based on their economic, environmental and social benefits, but the Oregon Water Resources Commission will make the final call about which ones will receive money, he said.

The department expects to have applications ready in August, but it has not yet set a deadline for submissions that aim to win funding in 2016, Loudon said.

E. Oregon farmers expect low wheat yields

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
EO Media Group

PENDLETON, Ore. — Standing in a field of golden wheat that reached barely up to his knees, Joe Rietmann said this year's abnormally short crop is clearly feeling the effects of drought.

"This is all typical drought stress," said Rietmann, owner of JDR Farms in Ione. "If you look over the expanse of the field and see the darker areas, that's where it's stunted."

Like most dryland farmers in Eastern Oregon, Rietmann expects the hot, dry weather will cut into his winter wheat harvest and lower yields by more than half in some areas. Ione's precipitation is three inches below normal dating back to September 2014 — when winter wheat is usually planted — while weekend temperatures forecast well into the triple digits.

If it weren't for about an inch of rain that fell in May, Rietmann said things would look even worse. As it is, he figures to harvest somewhere in the high-teens to mid-30s on bushels per acre, depending on the location of the field.

"In an agricultural endeavor, you just have to roll with it and stay in business," he said.

This year actually marks the third straight year of below-average precipitation for the region's wheat farmers after a solid season in 2012. That's compounded the problem for growers like Rietmann who manage their fields in a wheat-fallow rotation to build up moisture deep in the soil.

Larry Lutchter, soil scientist with Oregon State University Extension Service in Morrow County, said the cumulation of three dry years in a row has left farmers with virtually no water left in storage. He predicted yields could be less than 10 bushels per acre on land that typically grows 35-40 bushels.

"Even with crop insurance, it gets difficult to make ends meet," Lutchter said. "They'll get by, but they certainly won't make any money generating yields like this."

Umatilla and Morrow counties rank first and second by a wide margin in Oregon wheat production. Last year, the two



E.J. Harris/EO Media Group

Ione wheat farmer Joe Rietmann holds his hand out at the height his soft white winter wheat should be at this time of year with proper temperatures and moisture in one of his fields north of Ione.



E.J. Harris/EO Media Group

Ione wheat farmer Joe Rietmann holds a malformed head of soft white winter wheat. Low moisture and hot temperatures causes the heads of wheat to curl.

counties combined to harvest 17.8 million bushels of winter wheat on 357,000 acres, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

In 2012, the counties harvested 21.7 million bushels, thanks in part to higher rainfall. Precipitation in Ione averaged 12.23 inches between the months of September and June from 2010-2012, but just 7.5 inches from 2013-2015.

The timing of rains is also an important factor, said Jason Middleton, director of grain operations for Pendleton Grain Growers. Dryland farmers always need precipitation in May and June to finish a winter wheat crop, and precipitation has essentially shut off the past month, he said.

"I would expect (yields) to be down across the board this year," Middleton said.

Lower yields means more farmers could fall back on crop insurance to make them whole. Debbie Morrison, an agent with Wheatland Insurance in Pendleton, said she expects a lot of claims in the coming weeks.

"I don't think we'll have the high yields we were looking for," Morrison said. "As soon as they start harvesting, they'll call me and tell me if they're light."

Crop insurance provides coverage based on a field's production over the past 10 years, marking a guaranteed value that can be set either to yield or revenue. If harvest comes in below the guarantee, insurance pays the rest.

Farmers can only insure up to 85 percent of their crop, and the higher the percentage, the higher the premium, Morrison said.

Don Wysocki, soil scientist with OSU Extension in Umatilla County, said this is the kind of year crop insurance is designed to protect. He said the best farmers can do now is hope for a burst of rain in August or September, which will allow for earlier planting of next year's crop.

"An inch of rain in early September would do a lot of good," Wysocki said. "Yield expectations would be better if you can plant during the optimal time period."

Early rains also allow farmers to spray for grassy weeds, such as cheatgrass and feral rye, before planting, which saves money on specialized herbicides they would otherwise have to use to kill the weeds while sparing wheat.

Growers certainly don't enjoy the dry years, Rietmann said, but they always plan for difficult conditions and aren't surprised when they happen. Dry periods are normal for the area, he said, and conditions always turn back around.

"There are worse things in life than a dry crop year," Rietmann said. "This is just part of farming ... I suspect somewhere on the other end of this, it will pick back up again."



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

D'Ann Florek of the Washington State Department of Agriculture nails an Asian gypsy moth trap to a tree June 23 at the Port of Kalama on the Columbia River. WSDA will focus its gypsy moth trapping in Western Washington, forgoing hanging traps in Eastern Washington this summer because of funding cuts.

Washington confines gypsy moth search to west side of state

Agency focuses on ports, population centers

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

The state Department of Agriculture will limit its annual summer hunt for gypsy moths to Western Washington, opting to focus on catching plant-eating pests that arrived on ships or with new residents moving to the more populous half of the state, an agency official said Tuesday.

WSDA plans to hang 16,000 cardboard gypsy moth traps by the end of June, about 3,000 fewer traps than last year. The agency shares costs with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which cut its contribution, WSDA Pest Program manager Jim Marra said.

With fewer resources, WSDA will forgo placing the traps in Eastern Washington, though the agency probably will next year, Marra said.

Washington State Tree Fruit Association President Jon Devaney said the one-year absence of traps is not an immediate concern, but the association hopes WSDA will periodically check to keep the moths from becoming established on the east-side.

European gypsy moths, indiscriminate leaf eaters, have defied decades of eradication efforts in the Eastern U.S. and Great Lakes region. Gypsy moths in 2014 defoliated 214,972 acres in Pennsylvania, according to that state's Bureau of Forestry.

Washington and other states have adopted a no-tolerance policy to keep gypsy moths from advancing West.

WSDA last spring sprayed 220 acres in rural Clark County in southwest Washington, where 16 European gypsy moths were caught last summer. It was

WSDA's 93rd insecticide application since 1979 to kill the pests as they hatch. All but two of the applications were west of the Cascades.

Gypsy moths attach their eggs to outdoor surfaces. When attached to a motor vehicle or train, the eggs are easily transported cross-country. Over the years, most outbreaks have occurred in King and Pierce counties, the state's two most populous counties.

Marra said WSDA also will concentrate traps at coastal ports to detect Asian gypsy moths, which have a greater potential to rapidly spread because the females can fly, unlike their European relatives. WSDA last sprayed for Asian gypsy moths in 2000.

WSDA also will do intensive trapping in rural Clark County to see whether the aerial spraying of *Bacillus thuringiensis kurstaki* (Btk) worked.

Another focus will be Seattle's densely populated Capitol Hill, where last summer five moths were trapped within a block. WSDA decided not to spray because a search found no evidence of a reproducing population.

"We're going to take a good, hard look at Capitol Hill. It is an area of concern," Marra said.

WSDA will again this summer staff highway weigh stations to check moving vans traveling from the 19 states with gypsy moth infestations. Federal law requires movers to show papers certifying that they inspected goods for gypsy moth eggs.

Enforcement actions have not been taken against movers without the papers, but USDA sends a warning letter to the moving company, Marra said.

"The moving vans, we are finding, have a very high rate of non-compliance," he said.

USDA educates library patrons about Idaho agriculture

By **SEAN ELLIS**
Capital Press

BOISE — A farm information display set up in the Boise Public Library is teaching people in Idaho's largest urban area about the agricultural production that dominates the rest of the state.

The display was the idea of Vince Matthews, the state statistician for the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service Idaho field office.

Boise is by far the state's largest city, but many folks here are not aware of the extensive ag-

production occurring all around Idaho, Matthews said.

"It occurred to me that this might be a good chance for me to bring some of our information and share it with the public," he said. "We just want to show people what kind of agricultural production we have here in Idaho."

About 3,000 people visit the library in downtown Boise each day. Throughout the month of June, those visitors will walk by a display that includes handouts and information about Idaho's crop and livestock sectors.

The display includes general information about Idaho

agriculture and more detailed information about the state's top ag commodities, including milk and potatoes.

It shows the state's top farm commodities by cash receipts and points out Idaho is No. 1 in the nation in potato, barley, Austrian winter pea and food-size trout production and No. 3 in milk production.

The display also summarizes some of the highlights from the most recent Census of Agriculture, including that 97 percent of farms in the United States are family owned, one out of four farms are operated by be-

ginning farmers (producers with 10 years or less experience) and there are 569,000 female farmers in the U.S.

Several books dealing with ag-related issues are included in the display.

"I'm trying to get across to the general public the importance of agriculture and all the different aspects of it there are in Idaho," Matthews said. "You may not see it as much here in the city, but it's definitely all around the state and it's good for the public to see what the important crop and livestock items are in Idaho."