

Drought

Wash. on brink of federal drought declaration

State’s most productive farm counties meet threshold for relief

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Farmers and ranchers in Washington’s most productive agricultural counties will soon qualify for federal drought relief, barring an unexpected change in the weather.

At least 13 counties in south-central and northeast Washington are on track to be designated disaster areas by the U.S. Department of Agriculture beginning this week. Chris Bieker, the USDA’s Farm Service Agency state outreach coordinator, said June 22 that she expected county-by-county declarations in the coming days and weeks. Much of the West — including all of California, Nevada, Utah and Arizona and most of Oregon and southern Idaho — already have been

declared disaster areas. Although Washington Gov. Jay Inslee declared a statewide drought May 15, only Klickitat County has been included in federal declarations so far. The county was designated because it borders Wasco County in Oregon, which qualified for federal relief June 10. To qualify on its own, a county must be classified as being in a “severe drought” for eight straight weeks by the U.S. Drought Monitor. Klickitat and seven other south-central counties — Ya-

kima, Grant, Kittitas, Benton, Franklin, Walla Walla and Columbia — will reach the eight-week mark Tuesday. The region includes the state’s top five counties for value of crops and livestock produced there. In northeast Washington, all or portions of Okanogan, Ferry, Stevens, Pend Oreille and Spokane counties were classified as being in a severe drought May 19. All together, some 25 percent of the state has reached severe drought status. The area has grown slightly this

month. No measurable rainfall fell anywhere in the state between June 10 and 16, according to the Office of the Washington State Climatologist. June temperatures through Monday have been well above normal in Western and Eastern Washington. In Yakima, where growers with junior water rights face irrigation cutbacks, the average temperature was 9.5 degrees above normal, according to the National Weather Service. The National Oceanic and

Atmospheric Administration predicted June 18 that Washington will have above average temperatures for the rest of the summer. Federal drought relief includes loans to producers for operating and living expenses. Producers also may be eligible for payments to feed livestock and to replace drought-withered fruit trees. Bieker said producers should document their losses and contact their county Farm Service Agency for more information.

California: Many farmers miss deadline to report water cuts

By FENIT NIRAPPIL
Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — A majority of farmers and others holding some of California’s strongest claims to water have missed a deadline to confirm they stopped pumping from rivers and streams, state officials said June 22.

Data show less than a third of the farmers, water districts and communities responded to the broadest conservation order for those with nearly ironclad water rights by the State Water Resources Control Board.

The board’s order earlier this month affected 277 century-old rights to water from the Sacramento, San Joaquin and delta watersheds in the agriculture-rich Central Valley. State officials expect to demand even more of these senior water rights holders to stop diverting water as rivers and streams run too dry to meet demand in California’s fourth year of drought.

The dry spell has already prompted deep cuts to deliveries from government reservoirs and to farmers with more recent, and less secure, claims to water. Cities and



Rich Pedroncelli/Associated Press

In this photo taken Wednesday May 20, 2015, water runs irrigates crops on a farm near Dixon, Calif. A majority of farmers and others holding some of California’s strongest claims to water have missed a deadline to confirm they stopped pumping from rivers and streams.

towns serving residents and businesses are also under order to cut water use as much as 36 percent compared to 2013 levels. Senior water rights holders are historically spared from cuts, and some are challenging state cuts in court to keep it that way so farmers they serve can keep watering crops and taking care of livestock.

Water rights enforcement manager Kathy Mrowka said she was still reviewing the response data and didn’t have an immediate explanation for why it lagged. The senior water rights holders who didn’t respond to the water board within seven days were expected to take about 200,000 acre feet of water over the summer, a small sliver of the

state’s total water use. She previously said entities that ignore the water board would be the first to

face inspections and enforcement. The punishment for taking water is \$1,000 a day and \$2,500 per acre foot, enough

water to fill an acre of land one foot deep. Some people who have not responded to the board may not be illegally taking water because the streams and creeks to which they hold rights have dried out. Others may not have missed the state’s curtailment notices, or are waiting for a court decision in the coming days before responding. Those ordered to stop diverting from waterways have other options, including tapping groundwater, buying water at rising costs, using previously stored water or leaving fields unplanted. Regulators have already ordered thousands of other entities with less secure claims known as junior water rights to stop pumping. Only about a third of them have confirmed they stopped diverting water, although the ones that did respond are among the biggest water users.

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