Drought

Yakima Basin reservoirs 78 percent of average

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — The five main water reservoirs of the Yakima Basin are right where the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation wants them to be, given the state's drought.

Barring another extended heat wave, the agency should make it through the irrigation season and begin storing water in the fall and winter for next year, says Quentin Kreuter, the bureau's river operator in Yakima.

In a normal year, about 250,000 to 300,000 acre-feet of water are left in the reservoirs at the end of the irrigation season in late October to begin storing for the next season, Kreuter said.

"In this drought year, our target number is 135,000 acre-feet," he said.

That means if next winter is another dry one, the Yakima Basin will be in big trouble.

"I don't want to think about that. We don't have enough storage for one season," he said.

At full pool, the five reservoirs store a little more than 1 million acre-feet of water, but there's 2.2 million acre-feet of water rights on the system annually, he said. Typically, snowpack melt not retained in the reservoirs makes up the difference in spring and early summer runoff. This year, there was next to none. Reservoir usage began in mid-April, two months early.

As of July 15, Keechelus Lake, the reservoir along Interstate 90 just east of Snoqualmie Pass, was 41 percent full. The other four reservoirs were: Kachess, 73 percent; Cle Elum, 52 percent; Bumping, 83 percent and Rimrock, 93 percent.

Combined they were at 63 percent of capacity and 78 percent of the 30-year average for this time of year from 1981 to 2010, Kreuter said.

"Our inflow to the reservoirs is tracking at about 25 to 29 percent of average," he said. Reservoir releases are at 117 percent of average for the year, he said.

The plan, he said, is to draw down Keechelus and Cle Elum soonest to allow lower flows and shallow areas in the Yakima River upriver from the Teanaway River through Easton and including the Cle Elum River by mid-September to allow fish spawning.

From that point forward, more water is used from Rimrock and Bumping lakes to serve irrigators in the Yakima Valley, he said. The Roza Irrigation District, a junior water right district, hopes to have water to the end of September. Normally, it goes to Oct. 20 for tree fruit, hop and grape growers.

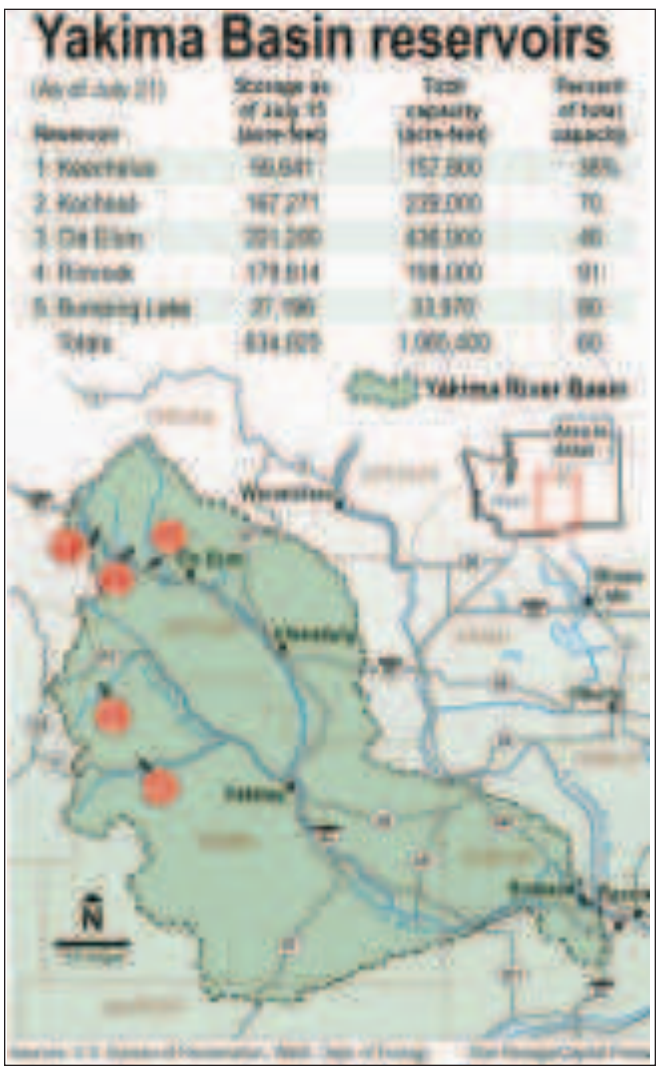
The Kittitas Reclamation District, serving a good portion of the valley around Ellensburg, will quit delivering water to growers in early August. While the Roza saved water early in the season for later, the KRD used water early for first-cutting Timothy and growers are forgoing a second-cutting.

Cooler weather and less evaporation the middle week of July reduced water usage and enabled the bureau to allow the KRD, Roza and other junior water right-holders 46 instead of 44 percent of average water supply, Kreuter said. The bureau likely will hold it there unless there's another long, hot streak, he said.

"That means a lot to farmers. It maybe gives them another week of water," he said.

At the end of the irrigation season, Cle Elum Lake could be at 135,000 acre-feet, Keechelus at 30,000 acre-feet and Kachess at 50,000 acre-feet, or somewhere around 20 to 25 percent for all three, Kreuter said. Then the push will be on to save water for next year.

"We will tighten up as much as we can and hope and pray for a wet, cold winter," he said. "What helped this year was that we filled up the reservoirs early. We saw this coming. If we hadn't, we'd have been in worse trouble."



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Keechelus Lake Dam near Snoqualmie Pass is shown at 61 percent full on June 14. One month later, it was 41 percent full. This is one end of the lake, which is one of five reservoirs serving the Yakima Basin in Washington state.

Roza Irrigation District growers get small water bump

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

SUNNYSIDE, Wash. — The Roza Irrigation District has increased water deliveries and still hopes to have water for growers through September.

The district, serving 72,000 acres of farmland in the Yakima Valley, shut down deliveries from May 11 to June 1 to save water for later in the season.

The district normally provides 7.1 gallons of water per minute per acre to growers but this year cut that to 1.8 gallons per minute because of drought.

It increased deliveries to 2.7 gallons per minute from June 29 through July 12 and to 3.0 gallons per minute for July 13 through Sept. 12 because of hot weather. It plans to return to 1.8 gallons per minute from Sept. 13 to the end of the month.

Normally, the district provides water to Oct. 20, but this year it was hoping to make it to Labor Day, said Scott Revell, district manager.

A junior water right holder, the district was cut to 44 percent of normal supply by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which manages the Yakima Basin Irrigation Project.

The amount was increased to 46 percent on July 15 because of cooler weather and less demand. That should give the Roza another five to seven days of water, said Quentin Kreuter, the bureau's Yakima River operator.

"That's a huge improvement and should help us make the end of September," Revell said.

Jim Willard, a Prosser grower and Roza Irrigation District board member, said growers on supplemental wells will make it but growers without wells are hurting.

"Some of my neighbors don't have access to wells and their trees are showing drought stress," Willard said.

He and some of his neighbors have kept portions of their operations fallow to have more water for other portions, he said.

"Twenty percent of my operation is fallow," he said.

Some of it had field corn last year and he held off replanting vineyard he wants to transition from one variety of wine grapes to another.

"One of my neighbors pushed out about 10 acres of apples. You look at the prices of apples right now and it's cheaper to push them out than pick them and get a bill for having them packed," Willard said.

"If you have marginal production, then it's a good decision and you can use the water somewhere else," he said.

Crop losses will be substantial throughout the district, Willard said. The state Department of Agriculture has estimated drought-related statewide crop losses of $1.2 billion with most of that being in the Yakima, Kittitas and Wenatchee valleys.

Willard said his cherries suffered this year from heat and less water. They were about a size smaller than normal and sunburned, he said.

"I think wine grapes are surviving fairly well but I'm concerned about my size and quality of my apples," he said. "Ten days to two weeks of temperatures over 100 degrees and apples aren't growing, just surviving."

The internal quality of apples could be "a major problem" in storage this year, he said.

"Imagine what you would feel like in 104-degree heat and less water," he said. "I hate to speak badly, but it's life and buyers know the situation."

Wenatchee Valley irrigation district reduces water

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

PESHASTIN, Wash. — About 400 pear growers in the Wenatchee Valley will receive one-third less water for the rest of the irrigation season because of drought.

The reduction is the same as 10 years ago when a board member of the Peshastin Irrigation District said it could cause pears to drop one full size, costing growers about $2 million.

The district's 14-mile canal parallels the Wenatchee River to the south and starts at a diversion dam on a river tributary, Peshastin Creek. The canal ends in Cashmere. The reduction includes Tandy Ditch.

The district serves 800 users on 4,000 acres and has no water storage reservoirs. About half the customers are pear growers. This season, as in 2005, the Peshastin district will be supplemented by water from the Icicle Irrigation District, which has about 7,500 acre-feet of water stored in four lakes in the Alpine Wilderness of the Cascade Mountains.

"Peshastin Creek is dropping quickly now," said Tony Jantzer, manager of both irrigaton districts.

The canal is getting just 31 cubic feet per second of water from Peshastin Creek and needs 50 cubic feer per second to operate, Jantzer said. The canal is already getting 15 cfs from the Icicle system, which is all a connecting pipeline will allow, he said.

The one-third reduction in water to Peshastin district users, 4.5 gallons of water per minute down from 6.75, will begin the week of July 20 and continue for the rest of the season, Jantzer said.

"We hope that's as far as we have to cut back, but we can't guarantee that," he said. "It looks like fruit is two weeks early. We want to get growers water while fruit is still sizing up."

The Icicle district should have enough water to make it through the season without rationing, he said. Anyone with questions may call him at 509-433-4064, he said.

"Hot weather already reduced fruit size somewhat. We don't need another size reduction, but we won't know until harvest. Pears and apples don't look as big as they should this time of year," said Randy Smith, a Cashmere grower served by the Peshastin district.

Done with cherry harvest, Smith said he will shift some water from cherry trees, stressing them a bit more, to provide more water to pears and apples.

"Hopefully, everybody works together and we will be able to still grow the quality-size fruit we need," said Dick Smithson, a Peshastin grower and irrigaton district board member.

The Wenatchee Reclamation District, serving 9,000 users and 12,500 acres on 34 miles of canal from the Wenatchee River at Dryden through Wenatchee to Rock Island, hopes to maintain a flow of 165 cfs and doesn't anticipate reductions, said Rick Smith, superintendent.

Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Peshastin Irrigation District canal, left, diverts from Peshastin Creek, right, on July 15. Low flows are causing the first irrigation reduction in 10 years.