

Drought

‘Extreme drought’ hits Washington

First time conditions this bad in a decade, Drought Monitor says

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Almost one-third of Washington is suffering an “extreme drought,” the first time the state has reached those conditions in a decade, the U.S. Drought Monitor reported July 30.

Meanwhile, a slice of Western Oregon running north and south through seven coastal counties is also in extreme drought for the first time.

Low streams, parched soils and the risk of wildfires tightened the drought’s grip on the West, according to the drought monitor, a partnership of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Na-



Dan Wheat/Capital Press
The Yakima River flows through Yakima Canyon between Ellensburg and Selah, Wash., on May 28. The river’s water is in high demand this year due to drought.

tional Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The worsening of conditions was especially apparent in Washington, where every region has seen the severi-

ty of the drought increase.

Sections of Western, Central and Eastern Washington, making up nearly 32 percent of the state, is in extreme drought, one step above severe drought and one below exceptional drought. Portions of the state not in extreme drought are in severe drought. Only one-quarter of the state was in severe drought six weeks ago.

Washington State Assistant Climatologist Karin Bumbaco said warm soils and the poor shape of pastureland contributed to the downgrading of conditions. She said she believes the percentage of the state in extreme drought will grow. The U.S. Drought Monitor updates conditions weekly.

A warm mass of water — nicknamed “The Blob” by State Climatologist Nick Bond — remains anchored off the coast, heating up the air moving inland and raising temperatures.

There is no evidence The Blob is related to the build up of greenhouse gases and doesn’t appear to have much influence over precipitation, Bumbaco said.

There is no firm explanation for below average rainfall in the state, though the dry spell may partly be a self-reinforcing weather pattern, she said.

In 2005, Washington’s last statewide drought before this year, 14 percent of state reached extreme drought status in mid-September and stayed for approximately three months.

In 2001, until this year generally recognized as the state’s worst drought since 1977, nearly 6 percent of Washington was in an extreme drought between September and November.

Idaho also saw an increase in the percentage of the state in extreme drought, jumping from 7 percent the week before to 22 percent.

Researchers: Replenish aquifers by flooding fields in winter

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

DAVIS, Calif. — A pair of researchers suggests replenishing vastly depleted groundwater supplies by flooding farm fields when the rains return.

Scientists Anthony O’Geen and Helen Dahlke of the University of California’s Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources propose using some of the state’s 3.6 million acres of farms and ranches with suitable topography and soil conditions to recharge aquifers during winter months.

Already, many water agencies recharge groundwater by spreading water on open land and allowing it to percolate into aquifers, but dedicated sites for this type of recharge are scarce, UC experts say.

While Dahlke is still conducting field experiments to evaluate how much water can be recharged in a couple of weeks and whether all that water would hurt crops, the researchers believe they could find enough farmland to use without disrupting production.

“(I)f the infrastructure is present (a big if), there is plenty of suitable land and low-risk crops that could be used,” O’Geen told the Capital Press in an email.

“The scenario we considered is a managed flood water application,” he added. Water managers would apply the water as a grower would for flood irrigation and not allow catastrophic flooding of fields, he explained.

Are the scientists concerned about losing water to evaporation?

“No, evaporation would be low during these times of heavy runoff events,” O’Geen said. “And even if there was some, the alternative would be losing it to the ocean.”

O’Geen, a UC Cooperative Extension specialist, and Dahlke, an associate professor, have published a peer-reviewed article on their idea in the current issue of the journal California Agriculture. The two work in the Department of Land, Air and Water Resources.

The study follows warnings from the UC-Davis Center for Watershed Sciences that farmers hit hardest by the drought could see their wells run dry this year. More than 1,800 wells around the state had already gone dry by the beginning of summer, according to Craig McNamara, chairman of the state Board of Food and Agriculture.

Many growers have responded by digging deeper wells.

In dry years, groundwater can account for more than half the irrigation water used in California, UC researchers say, but few groundwater basins are actively recharged.

A rainy winter would replenish some groundwater supplies anyway, but the researchers’ goal was to find soils best suited for deep percolation and are thus capable of accommodating large volumes of water rapidly, O’Geen said.

Poll: Americans favor farmers and food during drought

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD and EMILY SWANSON
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — When water gets scarce and the government slaps restrictions on its use, who should be first in line at the spigot? Farmers, according to an Associated Press-GfK poll.

The national survey provides a glimpse into how Americans think water should be managed at a time when abnormally dry weather has afflicted swaths of the country, and water shortages in some states have led to conflict over who should get water and how much.

Two-thirds of Americans believe water is a limited resource that can be depleted if people use too much, the poll found, and 70 percent believe that government should restrict how much residents and businesses use when drought takes

hold.

When asked to rate the importance of competing needs when water is scarce, 74 percent said agriculture should be a top or high priority, followed by residential needs (66 percent), wildlife and ecosystems (54 percent) and business and industry (42 percent).

To Cheryl Hendricks in parched California, it’s simple: To put food on the table “we rely on agriculture.”

“It’s getting kind of serious when you are not giving water to people who are producing food,” said Hendricks, 63, of Rancho Cucamonga, about 40 miles east of downtown Los Angeles.

She and her husband are taking shorter showers and moving lawn in response to



AP Photo/Chris Carlson, File
In this 2006 file photo, a worker adjusts the irrigation system that borders the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge in Calipatria, Calif. When water gets scarce and the government slaps restrictions on its use, farmers should be first in line at the spigot, according to an Associated Press-GfK poll released Aug. 3.

California’s four-year drought, but for growers and ranchers “it’s more important for them to have it.”

The poll’s findings appear to run against criticism of farming practices that demand vast amounts of water. In California, for example, agriculture accounts for 80 percent of all water drawn from rivers, streams and the ground. About half the water remains in the rivers and streams for environmental purposes. Producing California’s almond crop consumes more water than all the showering, dish-washing and other indoor household water use of the state’s 39 million people.

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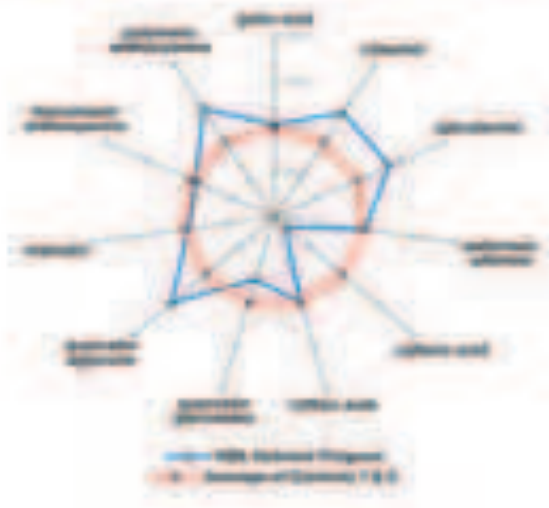
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