Wenatchee Valley irrigation district wins drought relief

Water from alpine lake to be sent to orchards

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — A Wenatchee Valley irrigation district will receive $41,000 in drought-relief funds to help it tap an alpine lake to nurture more than 2,300 acres of orchards through the summer.

The Icicle Irrigation District in Chelan County will match the state Department of Ecology grant and airlift equipment to pipe up to 850 acre-feet of water from Eightmile Lake in the Alpine Lake Wilderness.

The water will go to pear, apple and cherry growers served by the Peshastin Canal, which is actually in the Peshastin Irrigation District, which has a close relationship with Icicle.

Farmers along the canal had their water deliveries cut by one-third in July because of low stream flows. Tony Jantzer, who manages both districts, said tapping the lake won't restore the cutbacks, but should prevent further rationing and limit damage to trees.

"If we can get this Eightmile thing going, we can get both districts through to the 25th of September," he said Monday.

DOE has now awarded funding to five drought-relief projects. Tapping Eightmile Lake will be the first project that will immediately increase water supplies to an irrigation district.

DOE also awarded $133,000 to the city of Moxee in the Yakima Valley to install new pumps in two municipal wells.

Aquifer pressure and levels have been reduced as farmers ramp up irrigation to relieve drought conditions, according to the city.

Previously, DOE funded a municipal well in Stevens County, a fish-passage project on the Olympic Peninsula, and the advertising and enforcement of water restrictions in the Kennewick Irrigation District.

DOE has awarded a total of $324,302 for the five drought-relief projects. The agency is reviewing 10 other proposals and is still taking applications, DOE spokesman Dan Partridge said Monday.

"We're working through them as quick as we can," he said. "We're looking for projects that will provide relief for hardships as quickly as possible."

Jantzer said the district, which must match the state's $41,000, probably would have gone ahead without state funding. "It'll save our district a significant amount of money," he said.

Since 1926, Icicle has held rights to draw 2,500 acre-feet from Eightmile Lake, but it can only draw 1,650 acre-feet before the lake drops below the outlet. Icicle proposes to install about 800 feet of pipe to siphon water from lower levels. The district hopes to avoid running pumps in the wilderness area, which is in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. "We want to be more environmentally and people conscious if we can," Jantzer said.

Jantzer said he hopes to have water flowing by Aug. 31, though he said he's concerned about lining up a helicopter to fly equipment to the lake. Helicopter contractors are currently occupied fighting wildfires, Jantzer said.

Water deliveries via the Peshastin Canal were cut from 6.75 to 4.5 gallons per minute beginning July 20. In its application to DOE, Icicle said that without drawing more water from Eightmile Lake, those farmers could be cut back to 2.25 gallons per minute before the summer is over.

Drought fallows half-million acres in California

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER
Associated Press Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — California's now 4-year-old drought will cost state agriculture $1.84 billion in 2015, researchers estimated in a study Tuesday from the University of California at Davis.

The biggest chunk of that cost will come from the fallowing of 542,000 acres that lack water for irrigation, the study said. That's about one-fifth more land than drought forced out of production last year, researchers noted.

Agriculture, water and economic experts at the university stressed the extent to which farmers in California — the country's leading agriculture state — are relying on groundwater pumping to make up for dwindling stores of water in state rivers, creeks, reservoirs and snowpack.

Overall in 2015, farmers have nearly 9 million fewer acre-feet of surface water for irrigation, out of the 28 million acre-feet that state water officials say California agriculture uses in an average year. An acre foot is the amount an average California household uses in a year, and it is one of the standard units of measurement for water.

To make up for that, farmers and ranchers are pumping an additional 6 million acre-feet of water for irrigation out of the state's underground water aquifers this year, Tuesday's study said. The study adds to findings — from sources ranging from overbooked drillers of water wells to groundwater studies by NASA scientists — that California, in drought, is pumping up its groundwater at an alarming rate.

The study calls the rate of pumping of groundwater in the drought unprecedented. While California lawmakers in 2014 passed the state's first legislation to try to protect key aquifers from getting pumped dry of usable water, the state's 27-year timeline for bringing groundwater pumping under regulation is likely too long, the University of California at Davis researchers said.

The drought will hit farm workers as well as farm owners in 2015, costing 10,100 seasonal farm jobs, the study said. Agriculture overall employs more than 400,000 workers in California.

The study noted one area of agriculture that is booming despite the drought. The state's acreage of almonds and walnuts has grown by 200,000 since 2010, despite constraints on water, the study said. Economists say growing demand from consumers in China for nuts as snack food is driving the almond-orchard boom here.

Agriculture consumes about 80 percent of all available water from rivers, lakes and other sources that Californians use, and it accounts for about 2 percent of the state's economy.

Owyhee Project Oregon irrigators nearly out of water

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

Sean Ellis/Capital Press

A sugar beet field near Ontario, Ore., is irrigated June 11. Oregon farmers on the Owyhee Irrigation District will run out of water within 10 days.

ONTARIO, Ore. — Farmers who get their irrigation water from the Owyhee Project in Eastern Oregon are almost out of water, nearly two months earlier than normal.

The Owyhee Reservoir's gates are completely open and the last of the system's available storage water is flowing out, said Owyhee Irrigation District Manager Jay Chamberlin.

The project provides water for 1,800 farms and 118,000 acres of irrigated land in Eastern Oregon and part of Southwestern Idaho.

"The system might be able to run about another (10 days)," Chamberlin said. "We're on the last of our water."

The system, which has 400 miles of canals and laterals, has about 20,000 acre-feet of usable storage water left.

"That might sound like a lot of water but when you have a system as big and long as ours, that's a small amount," Chamberlin said.

Farmers in this region can count on receiving irrigation water from the Owyhee system into October during normal years but the water has run out in August the past two years because of a lingering drought.

OID patrons receive an allotment of 4 acre-feet of water during a normal year but the allotment was slashed to 1.6 acre-feet this year and 1.7 acre-feet last year.

Even though water is still flowing through the system, many farmers have already used up their allotment for this season.

This year's water supply will last about 10 days longer than it did in 2014, mainly due to timely May rains that reduced demand and improved in-flows into the reservoir slightly, OID officials said.

"It's a little bit better (this year) mainly because of those timely rains we had earlier this (season)," said OID board member and farmer Bruce Corn.

Nyssa farmer Craig Froerer said the fact that water will flow for almost two weeks longer than it did last year will significantly help the long-term condition of his permanent crops like mint and asparagus.

"That will make a huge difference for me," he said.

Bill Buhrig, an Oregon State University cropping systems extension agent in Malheur County, said the far reaches of the Owyhee system, where he farms, went dry July 22 last year.

"We still had water in the ditch this morning," he said Aug. 12. "You're looking at three weeks longer this year than last year. That's a long time."

But the water situation in this area is still difficult and the combination of the reduced allotment and early end to the irrigation season has made things challenging for farmers, Corn said.

Corn, like other farmers in the region, left a lot of ground idle the last two years and planted more crops that require less water but are also less profitable.

"It's not a good situation but people got by the best they could," he said. "It looks like the crops that are growing for the most part are going to be able to be finished."

Washington falls deeper into 'extreme' drought

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Drought conditions categorized as "extreme" have spread over nearly 43 percent of Washington state, an 11 percent increase in one week, the U.S. Drought Monitor reported Thursday.

The other 58 percent of the state is classified as being in a "severe drought," the next category down.

The one-week jump continues a trend. Three weeks ago, no part of the state was in extreme drought, which has now enveloped large sections of Western, Central and Eastern Washington.

Drought conditions have been driven by below-average rainfall and record or near-record temperatures.

Washington had its 13th driest and fourth hottest July on record, the National Centers for Environmental Information reported Wednesday. This followed the state's hottest and third driest June ever, according to records dating back to 1895.

The June-July combination put 2015 on course to surpass 1934 as the state's warmest year. Oregon also had its warmest June-July period on record and also has had its warmest calendar year to date.

A warm water mass, nicknamed "The Blob," remains anchored off the Washington and Oregon coasts, heating up inland temperatures, Washington State Assistant Climatologist Karin Bumbaco said. The Blob's influence on temperatures weakens as air moves farther inland, she said.

High humidity levels are keeping nights relatively warm, raising overall average temperatures, according to the climatologist's office.

Portions of Western Washington set July heat records. Extreme drought has now spread throughout the Olympic Peninsula, according to the Drought Monitor, a partnership of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Extreme drought also now covers more of Central Washington. Wenatchee sweltered through its second hottest July on record, while Yakima experienced its third hottest, according to the NCEI, a division within NOAA.

Washington's average temperature statewide in July was 68.6 degrees, 4.5 degrees above the 20th century average. Through the end of July, the average temperature for the year had been 50.8 degrees. At the same point in 1934, the average temperature was 49.1 degrees.