

Oregon

Some Oregon wheat regions do better than others in dry year

By MITCH LIES
For the Capital Press

Despite the fact wheat yields were down substantially in the Willamette Valley and in areas of Eastern Oregon, for the most part, Oregon wheat growers weathered this summer's drought in reasonable fashion, according to the state's top cereal agronomist.

"I think overall things turned out OK, even given the dry weather that we had," said Oregon State University Extension Cereals Specialist Mike Flowers. "For many people, we had more average yields and better test weight than what we had feared going into harvest."

Looking across the state, Flowers said growers in Wasco

and Sherman counties and in the Pendleton area were able to pull in average crops.

"Then, going up into the Walla Walla Valley, they caught some really timely rains," Flowers said. "So even though they had a lower than average rainfall, when they did get the rain, it came at the right time. I would say they also cut close to an average crop."

Then there were the down areas.

In the Willamette Valley, which accounted for about 100,000 of the state's 900,000 wheat acres in 2015, yields were down about 20 percent, Flowers said.

"For winter wheat, most of the guys in the valley are looking for somewhere in that 120

to 130 (bushel-an-acre) range. I would say on average that this year we were probably closer to somewhere between 100 and 110," Flowers said.

Yields in the drier areas of the east side apparently took even bigger hits.

"And as you get into the drier areas — Morrow, the western side of Umatilla — those guys are the ones that really got hurt," Flowers said. He estimated that their yields were down between 40 and 50 percent and, in some cases, even more.

"When you only get 10 inches (of rain a year) and you knock 3 inches off of that, it makes a big difference," he said.

Protein levels also fluctuated across the state, Flowers said,

but, in general, stayed low.

"While yes, we do have areas that had high protein, we had large areas that had normal protein levels," Flowers said. "I don't think we are in that bad of shape as far as protein goes, compared to where we worried we would be."

In soft white wheat, growers like protein levels of between 8.5 to 10 percent, Flowers said. Anything over 10 generally will need to be blended.

Looking forward, Flowers said the biggest need now for Oregon wheat is rain.

"Let's just hope that we get some of this rain they are calling for," he said on Aug. 26. "This is the second year that we are going into a dry fall, so rain is important."



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden, left, and federal Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack heard wildfire updates Aug. 28 at the Northwest Incident Coordination Center in Portland.

Wyden seeks change in Forest Service wildfire budgeting

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

PORTLAND — Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden said freeing up federal natural disaster money to fight fires, rather than dipping into the U.S. Forest Service's operating budget, is the primary thing he wants to accomplish when Congress reconvenes in September.

Speaking during a briefing at the Northwest Coordination Center, which coordinates the air and ground response to wildfires in Oregon and Washington, Wyden said there is bi-partisan support in the Senate for the idea.

"We can't have business as usual any longer," Wyden said. "The business as usual has been that fire prevention always gets shortchanged."

"I have no higher priority this fall than of getting this fixed," Wyden said.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, attending the briefing with Wyden, said 52 percent of the Forest Service's budget is eaten up by fire suppression work, compared to 16 percent in 1995. At this rate of increase, responding to wildfires will take two-thirds of the agency's budget within a few years, he said.

The Forest Service has seen a 115 percent increase in personnel assigned to fight fires, and a 38 percent decrease in people assigned to do everything else, Vilsack said.

As Wyden and Vilsack spoke, forest and rangeland officials have counted 3,382 fires in Oregon and Washington since June 1, with 1.4 million acres burned. Three firefighters died in Washington, and dozens of homes and outbuildings have been destroyed in the two states. To date, the fires have cost an estimated \$370 million to fight, with nearly 11,000 firefighters deployed. Fire man-

ers have counted nearly 60,000 lightning strikes this summer.

Wyden said much of the West has "just been slammed" by what he called a "terrible trifecta" of drought, high temperatures and an enormous build-up of fuel on the forest floor.

The legislation he favors would treat the largest fires as natural disasters, on par with hurricanes and floods and eligible for response and recovery funding from such agencies as FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

That would free up Forest Service money for its intended purpose such as increased thinning and salvage logging, which would reduce the intensity of fires by eliminating fuel.

Wyden, a liberal Democrat, said one of the key supporters is Wyoming Sen. Mike Enzi, a conservative Republican. The Obama administration strongly supports the proposal, Wyden said.

During the briefing, Wyden and Vilsack were told the fire season is projected to last through October. Heavy rain was predicted to hit western Oregon and Washington the weekend of Aug. 29-30, but it wasn't expected to reach the eastern side of both states, where the fires are raging. Instead, the system was likely to kick up fierce windstorms east of the Cascades, which could cause "extreme" fire behavior, said John Saltenberger, fire weather program manager for the Northwest Coordination Center.

Saltenberger said the first six months of 2015 were the warmest six-month period on record in the West since 1895. Fire season began about a month early; there were even some fires in the Oregon Coast Range in January, when the coast is normally socked-in and drizzly.

Budget meter keeps running higher for Oregon wildfire costs

By HILLARY BORRUD
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon has yet to burn through its fire-fighting budget, despite ongoing catastrophic wildfires around the state.

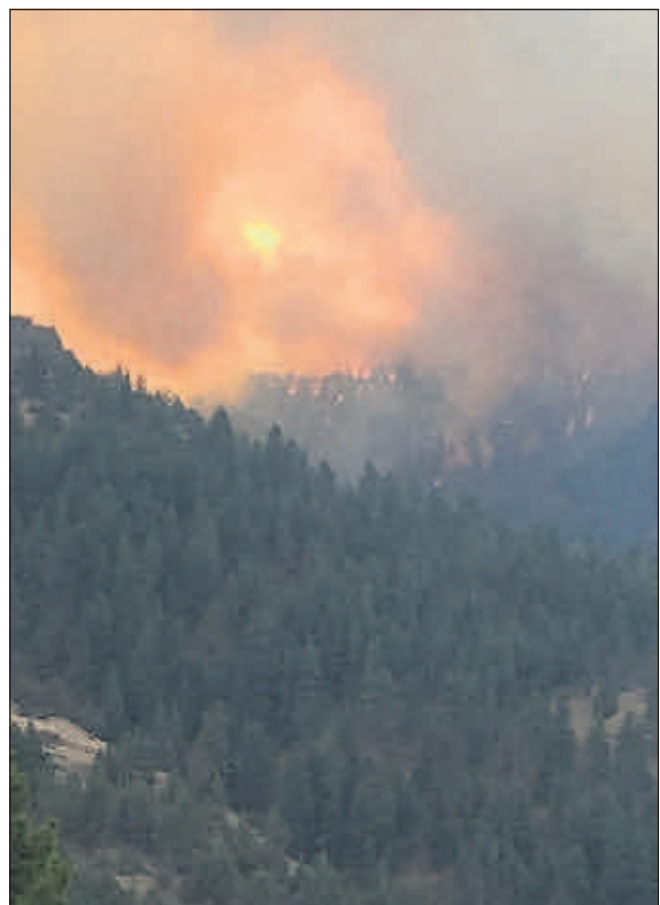
In what now appears to have been a prudent decision, lawmakers and a committee of forest landowners agreed earlier this year to more than double the amount of money budgeted for the Oregon Department of Forestry to fight fires to a total of \$50 million annually.

"I'm pleased we did it," said Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athens, a member of the budget-writing Ways and Means Committee. "We had been warned that fires this summer, with the kind of moisture that was predicted, could be pretty high."

The size of the Canyon Creek fire in Grant County and the Grizzly fire in north-eastern Oregon "are well over 120,000 acres and growing," he said. "And I think we've probably got another several weeks or so at least until we get some good rain."

As of Thursday afternoon, the Canyon Creek Complex near John Day had burned nearly 85,000 acres and the Grizzly Bear Complex had burned more than 68,000 acres in the Umatilla National Forest and private land in Oregon and Washington state. An additional 17 large wildfires continued to burn in other areas of the state Thursday, according to an interagency fire tracking website.

Oregon relies on a unique system to pay wildfire fighting costs. Property owners with land classified as forest



Marissa Williams/EO Media Group

A portion of the Canyon Creek Complex wildfire lights up the sky. The state of Oregon has budgeted \$50 million to fight fires this year, and has insurance to pay for expenses above that.

pay a state assessment to help cover firefighting costs in addition to money the Legislature appropriates from the general fund. The state has also purchased an insurance policy most years since 1973 to help cover firefighting costs.

After two severe fire seasons, however, the state's insurance deductible more than doubled from \$20 million to \$50 million. When lawmakers and forest landowners decided to purchase the policy earlier this year, they had to prepare to spend up to \$50

million before they could tap into the \$25 million insurance policy.

Rod Nichols, a spokesman for the Oregon Department of Forestry, said this week that the agency estimated its net spending this year at \$26 million, when expected reimbursements from the Federal Emergency Management

Sesquicentennial farms honored at state fair

Three farms located in Umatilla County

By GEORGE PLAVERN
EO Media Group

PENDLETON — The original 1840s farmhouse still stands at James Monroe Hemphill Farm south of Pendleton, used now for storage rather than a home that raised nine children on the rural Oregon countryside.

Since 1865, the Hemphill family has farmed this 800-acre homestead along Birch Creek. Colin Hemphill, 34, is the fifth-generation farm manager, growing 650 acres of wheat and raising 30 head of cows.

"I could never think of myself doing anything else," he said.

Farming has changed significantly over the last 150 years, but the Hemphill farm remains a family legacy. The Oregon Century Farm & Century Ranch Program will honor the Hemphills, along with two other Umatilla County farms, celebrating their sesquicentennial during an event Saturday at the Oregon State Fair in Salem.

JK Adams Ranches, of Adams, and AB Lieuallen Century Ranches, of Athens, have also reached the 150-year mark under continuous family ownership.

The Hemphill farm was established by James Monroe Hemphill and his wife, Elizabeth, in 1865. James Monroe was born in New Hampshire and initially came west to California during the 1849 Gold Rush.

The Hemphills married in Stockton, California, and came immediately to Oregon. They began raising sheep and sold chickens for \$1 each to miners in the nearby ghost town of Granite.

Chuck Hemphill, 70, is the fourth-generation farmer and Colin's father. He has since retired, but still lives near the farm with his wife, Dinah.

"To us, it's worth more than a farm because it's our family's history," Chuck Hemphill said.

Oregon and Sesquicentennial Farms will be honored at 11 a.m. at the state fair, in the Garden Tent on the west side of the fairgrounds. Oregon now has 1,175 Century Farms and 33 Sesquicentennial Farms statewide.

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