

Drought

Roza district growers get water a little longer

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

SUNNYSIDE, Wash. — The Roza Irrigation District, serving 72,000 acres of farmland in the Yakima Valley, is providing more water a little longer than it thought it would.

The district, one of the hardest hit by statewide drought, will maintain deliveries of 3 gallons of water per minute per acre until Sept. 21. It had planned to cut back to 1.8 gallons per minute on Sept. 13. The district believes it will provide water to Oct. 5 and a few days later in the lower end of the district. It had been hoping to make the end of September and normally goes to Oct. 20.

“The (U.S.) Bureau of Reclamation was taking a conservative approach in calculating water supply and as we get down to the last month we’re getting more accurate measurements, which is giving us a little more water to work with,” said Jim Willard, a Roza board member and Prosser grower.

Also helping was a little more rain in the Cascade



Jim Willard thins wine grapes near Sunnyside, Wash., in May. He says wine and juice grape tonnage and apple yields will be down in the Yakima Valley because of drought.

mountains trickling into reservoirs, he said.

“It’s better to have a few more gallons and days than to come up short from a farm management standpoint,” he said.

Normally, the district provides 7.1 gallons per minute throughout the season. This year, because of drought, it reduced flows early on and

then cut off all deliveries from May 11 to June 1 to save water for later in the season.

It resumed 1.8 gallons per minute from June 1 to June 29, then bumped up to 2.7 gallons per minute and on July 13 to 3 gallons per minute to help crops through hot weather.

The district is evaluating supply and demand and if de-

mand drops off, as it normally does about Sept. 17, deliveries may extend a few days beyond Oct. 5, the district said on its website.

The district has leased some water rights from other districts. Growers activated emergency wells and have compensated for less water by fallowing corn fields, cutting out less profitable apple

orchards and keeping acres fallow that had been planned for replanting.

Willard said there was a sizable reduction in field corn in the valley because of the drought. That’s increased costs for dairies having to haul silage from farther away. Cherries and pears were smaller.

The valley’s apple crop is one to two sizes smaller because of drought and heat, he said. He expects the statewide apple crop to be 10 to 20 percent smaller than the 125.2 million, 40-pound boxes estimated in August.

“I just started picking Red Delicious today (Sept. 14). I’m not optimistic about quality or quantity,” he said.

He prefers size 100 to 125 for export, but is looking at 113 to 138s, which will be 10 percent less crop.

“Down Hanks Road from my place there’s an orchard not pushed out yet but not watered this year. There’s 80 acres in that block. I know of about 200 acres in my area pushed out (removed) because of drought,” he said.

Willard’s wine and Con-

cord grapes are smaller due to heat and drought. It means less tonnage but better flavor, he said.

Willard mowed grass between his orchard and vineyard rows six times this year instead of three to keep it shorter and save water. He didn’t plant grass between rows in a new vineyard planting. Grass is good for plant health.

Growers have invested a lot in updating emergency wells and operating them, he said.

He shares an emergency well with a neighbor and another neighbor is pumping 1,500 gallons of water per minute from an emergency well but it’s costing \$1,350 per day in diesel.

“How many days do you want to do that?” Willard asked. “That’s pretty costly. There’s also mitigation costs (water leasing to use wells). The Department of Ecology is sharing in that.”

Willard said it will be November before he can tally his bottom line and that heat and stress has undoubtedly taken a toll on bud development for next year.

Irrigators worry about Ririe releases

By JOHN O’CONNELL
Capital Press

RIRIE, Idaho — Winter flood-control releases have started at Ririe Reservoir even as the irrigation season continues, and despite water users’ concerns that storage in the Eastern Idaho facility could be in short supply next spring.

Bureau of Reclamation Water Operations Manager Mike Beus said the releases have been authorized to start a few weeks early to enable Bonneville County to commence building a new boat ramp on a dry bank, and to supplement an American Falls Reservoir water supply on the verge of draining below minimum water-quality standards.

Beus said releases of about 335 cubic feet per second started Sept. 10 and will continue for 28 days, draining the reservoir from 55,000 acre-feet of storage to 39,500 acre-feet. He emphasized the releases are required to take place prior to Nov. 1, anyway, under the terms of the Army Corps of Engineers’ winter flood-control rule curve.

Bonneville County Com-

missioner Roger Christensen said the county also typically likes a full reservoir for as long as possible, but understands the need to release water before freezing temperatures arrive to block channels with ice. The irrigators, however, argue the rule curve is flawed and wastes critical water, and the current situation highlights its rigidity.

“We think it’s a dumb decision to prematurely draft the reservoir,” said Stan Hawkins, a board member with Mitigation, Inc., which is the dam’s contracted space holder. “You can’t turn water back uphill.”

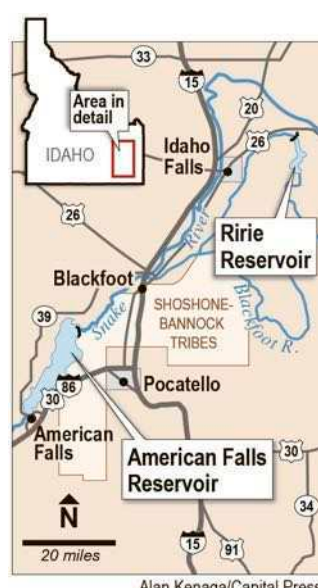
Mitigation, Inc., formed in 1991, represents canal companies upstream of American Falls Reservoir. When a settlement moved the priority date of 1891 Shoshone-Bannock tribal water rights back to the reservation’s formation in 1867, the canal companies opted to mitigate the difference with Ririe Reservoir storage rather than computing the effects on individual water rights. Mitigation, Inc., can lease any remaining water to offset operational costs. Hawkins said obligations to the tribes have sometimes ex-

ceeded 50,000 acre-feet. In recent years, mountain snowpack has endured only at higher elevations, mostly missing the Willow Creek Drainage surrounding the reservoir. Hawkins fears the obligation to the tribes next season could exceed supply if the pattern continues, forcing members to mitigate with their own supplies, or to provide financial compensation.

“Mitigation, Inc., is more or less on a collision course with becoming insolvent,” Hawkins said.

Lyle Swank, watermaster for the Upper Snake district, believes the winter rule curve could be relaxed by up to 30,000 acre-feet without risk. He said a Bureau of Reclamation study validated that management is overly cautious, but the Army Corps insists its own study would be necessary to implement change, with irrigators shouldering much of the analysis expense. The irrigators have asked their congressional delegation to take up their cause, Swank said.

Beus, however, believes the Corps — concerned about flash floods from a rain-on-



Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

snow event — has already compromised as much as possible. Last season, he explained the Corps agreed irrigators could hold 5,000 acre-feet above rule-curve limits, provided that they contract for heavy equipment to be at the ready to clear winter ice from channels. Beus acknowledged the rule curve is conservative and based on an extremely unlikely flood but added, “These semi-arid basins are very flashy.”

Irrigation water in SW Idaho will flow until early October

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Most canals in Southwestern Idaho will continue to carry irrigation water until the first part of October. But water managers expect to have less carryover water than they did last year once the season ends.

Water managers said area reservoirs entered the 2015 season with a decent amount of carryover water, which enabled most irrigators to have a mostly normal water season despite poor snowpack this past winter.

The Boise Project Board of Control, which delivers water to five irrigation districts and 165,000 acres on the Boise River system, will turn off deliveries on Oct. 5.

How much storage water is left in the system’s Anderson Reservoir account will determine how much water is moved downstream to Lake Lowell after Oct. 5 to pad that reservoir a little bit prior to next year, said BPBC Manager Tim Page.

Page said it’s anticipated the project will have about the same or maybe a little bit more carryover water in its reservoirs as it did in 2014 — 150,000 acre-feet — when the season ends.

But other districts expect to have less carryover water than they did last year.

Canals on the Payette River system will continue to carry irrigation water through October, said watermaster Ron Shurtleff.

“We’re in good shape this year,” he said. “But reservoir levels are very low and we have a challenge ahead of us to make sure we have a good supply for next year.”

The tentative cutoff date for Pioneer Irrigation District water deliveries is Oct. 6 but the firmness of that date depends on what some other districts do with their water in the next few weeks, said Alan Newbill, president of Pioneer’s board of directors.

But Pioneer’s carryover water supply will be about a third less than what it was in 2014, he said.

Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District, the valley’s largest, will continue delivering water until Oct. 1. NMID Water Superintendent Greg Curtis said the district expects to have less carryover water than the 35,000 acre-feet it did last year, “which isn’t a lot. Carryover is going to be pretty bleak.”

Like most irrigators in the valley, farmers and others who get their water from the Payette system will be depending on a decent snowpack this winter to provide them with an adequate water supply for the 2016 season.

The Payette system started the 2015 season with good carryover supplies from 2014, but it won’t have that luxury next season, Shurtleff said.

Newbill said last year’s decent carryover supplies and a conservative approach to water use by the district and its 5,800 patrons were both major factors in making this year’s water supply last until October.

“Everybody’s learning to be more careful with their water. We certainly could have used it all this year,” he said. “That’s been the whole key: be really conservative with the water and make it (last).”

Kittitas growers find alternative water source

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

ELLENSBURG, Wash. — Kittitas Reclamation District terminated water deliveries in early August because of drought, but pear and apple growers have been finding alternative water.

Ben Kern, at the foot of the Interstate 82 hill southeast of Ellensburg, is an example. He has 40 acres of pears and apples on the KRD, cut off Aug. 6, and another 60 acres on Cascade Ir-

rigation District, a senior water right district that curtails water next week.

KRD ran out 2½ months early because it used full water volume for first-cutting Timothy. CID is finishing early for the same reason, using up water for hay when it was hot, Kern said.

Kern got approval from a court, both irrigation districts, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the state Department of

Ecology for a temporary water right transfer that allowed him to buy unused water from fallow ground in the CID and use it on his orchards dry from the KRD shut off.

“That’s how I got by. Most other growers got by with emergency drought wells,” he said.

That included big companies — Zirkle Fruit Company of Selah and Columbia Valley Fruit of Yakima, he said.

Kern is close to finishing pear and apple harvests and said fruit size suffered some because of heat and lack of water.



Dan Wheat/Capital Press
Ben Kern, pear grower, Ellensburg, Wash., May 28.

SAGE Fact #117
In 1905 Congress authorized the Umatilla Project. The project connected many private water canals and ultimately converted 45,000 acres of sagebrush into productive agricultural land.

Visit the SAGE Center:
Sunday - Thursday 10am - 5pm
Friday & Saturday 10am - 6pm

Find us on:
101 Olson Road - Boardman, OR 97818
(541) 481-7243
www.visitsage.com

NEED MORE WATER?
IT'S TIME TO UPGRADE.

LOOK UNDERGROUND BEFORE YOU DRILL WITH OUR INNOVATIVE MT4 GEOPHYSICAL IMAGING SYSTEM TO FIND YOUR BEST WATER ZONES AND DRILL YOUR HIGHEST VOLUME WELL.

- Water Well Drilling
- Subsurface Imaging
- Pump Sales & Service

Subsurface Imaging (800) 401-9092
Drilling and Pumps (303) 857-7540
WWW.HYDRORESOURCES.COM

WE WANT YOUR RESEARCH IDEAS

Call for Proposals 2016

PROPOSAL DEADLINES

FARMER/RANCHER:
DECEMBER 2, 2015

PROFESSIONAL + PRODUCER:
DECEMBER 2, 2015

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
OCTOBER 28, 2015

EMAIL: WSARE@USU.EDU
WEBSITE: WSAREGRANTS@USU.EDU/INFO

4865 OLD MAIN HILL, UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY, LOGAN, UT 84322