

# Drought

## Ecology VOWS speedy drought response

By DON JENKINS  
Capital Press

The Washington Department of Ecology will begin working with drought-stricken irrigation districts as soon as January to find water, months earlier than this year, the agency's director, Maia Bellon, said.

"This historic drought is not over, and we're already planning for next year," Bellon told reporters in a conference call. "We're planning and preparing to spend much more on leasing water this next year, and very early."

Bellon and other state officials reported on the drought's impact and what agencies are doing to be prepared for next year.

High on the list is getting a jump on facilitating temporary water leases, especially in the Yakima Valley. DOE approves and subsidizes water-right transfers. By the time the drought's severity became clear last spring, the region's junior water-right holders were hard-pressed to find water, even at high prices.

Roza Irrigation District General Manager Scott Revell told the Capital Press that starting the search in January would be better.

Some neighboring districts flatly said "no" to Roza, he said.

"We didn't have the information to make decisions until late April," Revell said. "A lot of ground had already been planted."

Bellon said the state will be better positioned for a second year of drought, which she said is likely.

Unlike last year, DOE will enter the year with a drought-relief fund. This year, DOE patched together a limited response until the Legislature allocated in late June \$16 million for drought relief over two years.

Since then, DOE has committed \$6.5 million and is still considering requests for drought-relief projects totaling \$1.8 million.

Western Washington had what Bellon called "sweet relief" from the drought in recent weeks. But she said the benefits will be short-lived. Meanwhile, Central and Eastern Washington have seen no improvement, she said.

The drought has diminished crops and lowered water supplies heading into what climatologists say will be another warm winter, she said. "This drought has gone in the wrong direction, and we face water with a huge water deficit."

The Washington State Department of Agriculture estimated in May that drought losses could total \$1.2 billion, mostly in the Yakima Valley. The number was only a rough approximation that assumed farmers would leave some fields fallow.

Bellon said "agricultural losses were worse than feared."

Agriculture Director Derek Sandison said he couldn't say whether losses will be higher or lower than projected by his department.

Analysts will have to take a more nuanced approach to determine actual losses, he said.

"It's difficult to draw broad conclusions in this regard," Sandison said. "It would be speculation on my part. We're several months away from having hard numbers."

Washington State Climatologist Nick Bond said it's possible — he estimated there's a 10 to 15 percent chance — that winter will be just as warm as last year.

"El Nino is rearing its head in the Tropical Pacific," he said. "All in all, the odds are strongly tilted toward another toasty winter."

## Early cranberry harvest shapes up as dry run

### Drought could slow down reaping bumper crop

By DON JENKINS  
Capital Press

LONG BEACH, Wash. — Severe drought persists on Washington's coast, complicating the region's cranberry harvest.

"I've never had a year like this in 35 years," grower Malcolm McPhail said. "The weather this year is a tough deal."

For several months, the weather had been mostly on the side of the state's cranberry growers, who are concentrated along the southwest coast.

The region's hottest July on record, sandwiched between its second-warmest June and August, challenged farmers to keep vines from withering. McPhail's son, Steve McPhail, who also grows cranberries, said that before this summer he had never seen brown spots in bogs.



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Juan Hernandez rounds up cranberries Sept. 23 on the Long Beach Peninsula in southwest Washington. Cranberry growers receive a premium for harvesting before October, but the drought has led to a shortage of water to flood bogs and early fall showers have been light.

But berries grow better in the sun than fog. The U.S. Department of Agriculture projected in August that this would be the state's best cranberry crop in a decade. "This year has been good," Steve McPhail said.

The lack of rain, however,

threatens to extend the harvest, putting berries at risk of rot, frost and ripening into a dark color unsuited to consumer expectations.

While some cranberry growers dry pick their fruit, many draw from on-farm

ponds to flood bogs, then churn the water to shake loose berries.

With ponds slow to recharge, farmers may have to move slower from bog to bog.

Meanwhile, growers are beginning to contend with colder nights, using up water for frost

protection. In the past week, nighttime temperatures started dropping into the 30s, according to Washington State University's weather station in Long Beach.

Besides ponds, Malcolm McPhail, one of the state's larger cranberry producers, has water rights to 35-acre Black Lake on the Long Beach Peninsula.

To take advantage of a premium paid by the Ocean Spray cooperative for berries picked before October, McPhail flooded 4 acres with a foot of water on Sept. 21. By Sept. 23, he was revising his harvest plans because the lake was dropping too fast.

"I'm slowing down because I don't want to take any more water out of Black Lake," McPhail said. "It's serious. We're waiting for a big rainstorm."

In October, the heart of the cranberry harvest, Long Beach usually receives more than 7 inches of rain. The U.S. Climate Prediction Center forecasts that the month has equal chances of being wetter or drier than normal.

## Idaho moisture outlook better in south than north

By JOHN O'CONNELL  
Capital Press

BOISE — At the start of a new water year, oceanic conditions indicate Northern Idaho farmers will face another dry winter, said Ron Abramovich, water supply specialist with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

But the Southern Idaho outlook is much hazier, and history tells Abramovich not to rule out an above-normal snowpack for the region.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration projects all of the state will experience above-normal temperatures and a likelihood of below-normal precipitation this winter, with the odds of dry weather progressively in-



Courtesy of Natural Resources Conservation Service

Phil Morrissey, a hydrologist with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service trims vegetation surrounding the SNOTEL snow measurement site at Bogus Basin in the foothills above Boise. NRCS hydrology experts predict a dry winter in Northern Idaho but optimistic Southern Idaho could still see ample moisture.

creasing further north in the state.

"I'm a little more optimistic (for Southern Idaho)," Abramovich said. "I'm leaning more toward the wetter

side than the drier side."

Abramovich explained a strong El Nino pattern has developed — characterized by warm water stretching from the mid-Pacific to South

America along the equator — and trade winds have held the water in place.

Abramovich analyzed a dozen strong El Nino years of the past, finding half the time, Southern Idaho experienced above-normal snowpack.

Elsewhere in the state, however, a strong El Nino pattern translated to below-average moisture 90 percent of the time. He said the current pattern represents the strongest El Nino since 1983, which was an exceptional water year in Southern Idaho.

Under a strong El Nino, Abramovich said, storms often track from California and enter Southern Idaho from the Owyhee Basin, where growers have faced extreme shortages in recent years.

## Abnormally warm, dry fall in store for Northwest, expert say

By MATTHEW WEAVER  
Capital Press

Pacific Northwest farmers aren't likely to see more precipitation this fall and winter, a Washington State University weather expert says.

Abnormally high temperatures and dry conditions are expected to linger, WSU AgWeatherNet meteorologist Nic Loyd said.

"Unfortunately, it doesn't look good in terms of the expected snowpack situation for the Cascades," Loyd said. "That will have an impact on water supplies for 2016."

Loyd blames a shift in the global atmospheric circulation, with a unusually warm ridge of high pressure over the region, coming from the equator instead of the colder regions. The Northwest has been isolated in the weather anomaly from the rest of the U.S., he said.

Colder periods during the winter when snow falls in the mountains are likely, he said, but long-term weather forecasts and short-term climate models suggest a strong and strengthening El Nino, which typically means a dry winter and spring in the Northwest.

It could be another "difficult" water year through next summer, Loyd said.

"Hopefully not, I can't imagine it would be as unusual as the last year or so, when we had a record-low snowpack followed by a record warm summer, so you have a very unfortunate combination of very low supply followed by very high demand," he said.

Loyd expects a turnaround to begin in mid-2016.

"Historically, after strong El Nino events, that situation tends to shift away towards neutral or maybe even La Nina conditions the following winter," he said. "It doesn't always happen, but history would definitely be on our side."

WSU's fall forecast was met with a mixed response from two of the state's largest commodity groups.

"We hope they're wrong," said Glen Squires, CEO of the Washington Grain Commission.

Higher temperatures increased protein in wheat, above levels desired by some key overseas customers, and reduced the wheat crop.

This was the second dry year in a row, Squires said.

"Instead of spring rains, we had triple-digit temperatures," he said. "We're hoping maybe this third year has a little more moisture to offer."

Todd Fryhover, president of the Washington Apple Commission, said a warmer fall would help apple farmers in the short-term. It provides the opportunity to harvest fruit thoroughly and in an orderly manner, he said.

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