

Oregon's water perceptions need to change, top adviser says

By MITCH LIES
For the Capital Press



Richard Whitman

SUNRIVER, Ore. — Oregon has a public perception problem when it comes to water quality, said Richard Whitman, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's natural resources policy director.

Addressing foresters at the Oregon Forest Industries Council's annual meeting here Oct. 12, Whitman said: "The public perception out there is that water quality is bad and it is getting worse."

"That is not true," Whitman said.

"In actuality, since the passage of the (Estuaries and) Clean Water Act in 2000 ... we've been pretty much

stable. We haven't gotten worse. In some places, it is getting a bit better. In some places it's not.

But there is this perception out there in the public that we have an enormous water quality problem in the state, and it is simply not the case," Whitman said.

"The Northwest is also a breeding ground for litiga-

tors, unfortunately," he said, "and that litigation also feeds this perception that we are not in good shape in terms of water quality."

Whitman said the state also has a perception problem when it comes to water quantity.

"The problem in the land of water quantity is that we have plenty of water in Oregon and that we are not California," Whitman said. "That is not really the reality, either."

"These public perceptions about where we are at as a state are in and of themselves a problem," he said. "They make it difficult to build collaborative lasting solutions to real problems and, in order to work through that, we need

to be thinking not just how to work through the substantive issues, but also how to bring the public along, so the public understands where we are truly at in terms of resource issues and can be part of the solution, rather than creating additional problems in terms of solutions."

Whitman said that while water quality in Oregon is good, it could be better.

"It is not necessarily good enough for all the things that we want water to do," he said. "It is not good enough in some places for our fisheries. In some places, we have issues with our drinking water."

"So there is still some progress to be made on water

quality, even though we have made an enormous amount of progress already," he said.

"Also, with warming temperature and less snowpack, we are facing water-quality challenges," he said. "We saw that this year with a need for fish advisories on many of our streams in Oregon because of low flow and unusually high temperature."

"On the water quantity side, Oregon is blessed with abundant water, but with less snow and warmer temperatures, we have several problems. We have a storage problem," he said. "Without the snowpack, we are losing that storage."

Whitman said Brown was

instrumental in advocating for passage of the \$54 million package that lawmakers passed in the 2015 Legislature to fund water storage projects.

"The governor has followed that up with an executive order on drought, making sure that our Oregon agencies lead by example in terms of reducing their water use, and also putting in place a new Oregon drought plan so we are better prepared in the future for the type of summer we saw this past year," Whitman said.

In an interview after his presentation, Whitman said he hopes to have some water-storage-project news in the near future.

Western alfalfa feeder hay prices plummet; High-quality alfalfa 'moving nicely'

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

One of many stacks of export hay is shown last winter at Wesco International, a hay exporter in Ellensburg, Wash. Exporters still have plenty of premium hay for export, contributing to lower prices.

Hay prices are generally down throughout the West from a year ago, but prices of the lowest quality — feeder hay — are down the most.

It's a historic drop east of the Sierra Nevadas, says Dave Doonan, of Montgomery Creek Ranch, just north of Bishop, Calif.

"We had a run-up in 2008 and then a drop in 2009, but nothing like this year. The milk market has been down and a lot of hay in this area is not moving," Doonan said.

There was a fair amount of hay weather damage up and down the coast this year, resulting in more alfalfa feeder hay than usual, said Mark T. Anderson, president and CEO of Anderson Hay & Grain Co. in Ellensburg, Wash. Alfalfa feeder prices are the lowest in years, \$30 to \$40 lower than a year ago, he said.

Exporters still have plenty of carryover from last winter's work slowdowns at West Coast ports, said Anderson, a major exporter.

Unless it's premium, there's no demand and while supreme- and premium-grade alfalfa was going for \$300 to \$350 per ton a year ago and feeder grade was \$220 to \$240, now premium is where feeder was and feeder is under \$100, Doonan said.

"I've seen it at \$75 to \$90 at the stack," Doonan said. "We've done OK because we sold ours on early contracts, but we have neighbors who can't sell it."

He said he hasn't seen prices that low in the 15 years he's been helping his father-in-law run the ranch.

Normally, San Joaquin Valley dairies buy hay from the Bishop area but now they're not, he said.

"Neighbors who normally never tarp hay (because they sell it) are tarping it," he said.

With drought and less production, supply shouldn't be that much ahead of demand, Doonan said.

But while California and Nevada are down some 6 to 12 percent in production, the drop in supply is more than offset by less demand for hay by dairies, said Daniel H. Put-

nam, a University of California-Davis Extension alfalfa and forage specialist.

Dairies are having a rough go because of lower milk prices and are working at keeping feed costs under control, Putnam said. Dairies are willing to pay for high quality hay but are supplementing it with other feed, he said. They are not willing to buy lower-grade hay, he said.

"Also, corn, grain and soybean meal, canola meal and other concentrates are at lower levels so they tend to pull down hay prices," Putnam said.

Some Sacramento Valley rice growers grew oat hay, a

lower-quality hay, creating more oversupply and driving down prices, he said.

Meanwhile, the National

Agricultural Statistics Service reported all hay production is up 5 percent in Oregon, Washington and Idaho over

last year.

That has contributed to oversupply along with inventory remaining from the port slowdowns, a strong dollar and decreasing milk and commodity prices, said Drex Gauntt, a Pasco, Wash., hay grower.

"No one indicator is where the problem lies. I'm not a purveyor of doom and gloom for the alfalfa market. I think we will see it come back," Gauntt said.

High-quality alfalfa is still "moving nicely" at \$230 to \$280 per ton, Putnam said.

There's a good \$100 difference between high and lower grades and that difference grows when hay prices drop, he said.

"In some cases, we're seeing fire sale prices," he said.

Exporters are buying more again because of lower prices, and hay exports to China went up 20 percent last year despite the work slowdown at West Coast ports and genetically engineered hay residue concerns, Putnam said.

Pacific Northwest hay volume up 5 percent

Pacific Northwest hay production is up 5 percent from 2014, the National Agricultural Statistics Service reported on Oct. 8.

Idaho alfalfa is pegged at 4.53 million tons, up 7 percent. Harvested acreage is down 60,000 acres, to 1.03 million acres, but yield is expected to be 4.4 tons per acre,

up 0.5 ton from 2014, NASS said.

Oregon alfalfa is forecast at 1.7 million tons, up 11 percent from last year. Harvested area at 370,000 acres is up 20,000 acres and yield, at 4.6 tons per acre, is up 0.2 ton from 2014.

Washington alfalfa is forecast at 2.1 million tons, up 6

percent with harvested area at 420,000 acres, unchanged from 2014. Yield is expected to be 5 tons per acre, up 0.3 ton from last year, NASS said.

In other hay production, Idaho is estimated up 20 percent, Oregon is unchanged and Washington is down 14 percent, NASS said.

— Dan Wheat

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