

Water

Idaho ups water enforcement efforts

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — The state in the past few years has upped its efforts to prevent the unauthorized use of water and those enforcement efforts will continue to increase.

Most Idaho Department of Water Resources staff members use Geographic Information System data in their day-to-day work efforts and that has led to increased discovery of unauthorized uses of water without a valid water right, said Rob Whitney, the department's water distribution section manager.

"That leads to increasing discovery of problems," he told several hundred people during Idaho Water

Users Association's annual meeting in November. "The more we look, the more we find."

In the past, formal enforcement actions against unauthorized water use were rare and complaints were addressed at the regional level, Whitney said.

But as water supplies and water rights have become more limited, that has led to increased pressure to take enforcement actions against people who use or store water without a water right or exceed the parameters of that right, he said.

Most of the complaints the department receives come from other water users, IDWR Water Compliance Bureau Chief Tim Luke told the Capital Press.

"It's sort of an issue of fairness to them," he said.

IDWR has dedicated more resources to water enforcement in recent years and might seek additional funding to expand them, Whitney said.

The department in 2012 added a full-time position to coordinate enforcement efforts and developed an enforcement data base in 2013.

Luke said the goal of the department's enforcement actions is to correct unauthorized water users, not to punish people.

"We're not trying to be punitive," he said. "We're trying to stop (unauthorized water use) and get them into compliance, if we can."

But the department will take for-

mal enforcement action if a problem isn't corrected. Between 2013 and 2015, IDWR issued 89 notices of violation and collected \$314,461 in civil penalties.

IDWR plans to do more area-specific audits to flush out problems.

During a pilot project in the Upper Big Wood River basin in 2014, IDWR staff reviewed 490 parcels, issued 30 notices of violation and collected about \$20,000 in civil penalties.

Other large-scale audits are planned for or are ongoing in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer, Raft River and Mountain Home areas.

IDWR issued a memo to staff in October that outlines the department's policy on the enforcement

process.

The memo came as news to Boise water attorney Dan Steenson, who asked Whitney during the IWUA meeting why water users weren't involved in creating it.

"I do have a lot of questions about this," he said. "This is the first I've heard of this and this does seem rather significant."

"Why didn't they talk to us about it beforehand?" Steenson said later. "Is this something they should only be doing by rule-making?"

Luke said the memo documents existing department policy on the issue and is meant to ensure consistency in the enforcement process.

"It's just guidance to staff on how to implement that process," he said.



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Keechelus Lake along Interstate 90 on Snoqualmie Pass is shown on Nov. 24. It was at 67,880 acre-feet of water that day, 124 percent of average. Recent storms brought the Yakima Basin's five reservoirs up to normal levels for this time of year on Nov. 18.

Yakima Basin water reservoirs catching up

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — Recent rain and snowstorms have brought Yakima Basin reservoirs back up to where they should be at this time of year after hitting their lowest levels in years because of drought.

The reservoirs reached 100 percent of normal on Nov. 18, increased to 105 percent on Nov. 21-23 and then dropped back to 100 percent by Nov. 30, said Chris Lynch, hydrologist for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Yakima Project.

"I'm pleased that we've gained that much storage. We dramatically gained ground in the past month, so that's a positive," Lynch said.

It's not particularly surprising because a few good storms can do that, he said. Similar gains occurred a year ago from a few early-season storms, he said.

The five reservoirs — Keechelus, Kachess, Cle Elum, Bumping and Rimrock — have a combined capacity of a little more than 1 million acre-feet of water. Usually, they don't fill until May or June from melting snowpack.

More rain than snow at low elevations this winter could cause the peak level in April or May to be short of full, Lynch said.

Sufficient snowpack is more critical for enough irrigation water next summer than having the reservoirs full at any given point. Irrigators on 464,000 acres, mostly farmland, in the Kittitas and Yakima valleys depend on 1.7 million acre-feet of water annually. Usually 1 million acre-feet is stored in the reservoirs and 2.3 million acre-feet is in the snowpack that melts in spring and summer and mostly feeds the reservoirs.

The reservoirs hit a season-ending low of 107,000 acre-feet on Oct. 28, compared to 330,000 last year and a 30-year average of 270,000.

Rain ends drought in Western Washington, federal monitors say

Drought still 'extreme' on eastside

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Heavy November rains have at least temporarily KO'd the drought in Western Washington, including on the Olympic Peninsula and Skagit Valley, where farmers faced irrigation cutbacks last summer, the U.S. Drought Monitor reported Nov. 25.

While most of Eastern Washington remains in "extreme" drought, the westside of the Cascade Curtain has become almost drought-free.

Some 36 percent of the state no longer has drought status. The entire state was in a "severe" to "extreme" drought in early October. As recently as two weeks ago, all of Washington was in at least a "moderate drought."

Sections of Western Washington have received 15 to 20 inches of precipitation since Nov. 1, according to the Drought Monitor, which provides a snapshot of current conditions, but does not project future water supplies.

More importantly for the 2016 growing season, the Olympic Mountains and North Cascades are accumulating snow, and the five Yakima River Basin reservoirs have caught up to normal levels.

It's early and the U.S. Climate Prediction Center reaffirmed last week that El Nino conditions in the Pacific Ocean are likely to warm the Pacific Northwest's winter. But the Olympic range snowpack was, encouragingly at 161 percent of normal Nov. 27, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The snowpack was less than 5 percent of normal at the end of last winter and was the most visible sign of drought in Western Wash-



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Water covers a field Nov. 18 in southwest Washington. November storms washed away the drought in Western Washington, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor, which reports current conditions but does not make long-term projections of water supplies.

ington. Olympic Peninsula farmers who draw from the snow-fed Dungeness River were among the growers most affected by drought.

The snowpack in the North Cascades on Nov. 27 was 116 percent of average. The snowpack was less than half of normal last winter. Low summer flows led to irrigation cutbacks for some northwest Washington growers.

Heavy rain in the Chehalis River Basin flooded farmland this month. Some farmers there were cut off from irrigation water after a dry and hot spring and early summer.

With their reservoirs filling up, Seattle, Everett and Tacoma declared Nov. 23 that their municipal water supplies were back to normal and ended a voluntary conservation program.

The Cascades' rain shad-

ow has kept precipitation below average this month in Central and Eastern Washington. With the exception of the Olympics and North Cascades, snowpacks in Washington are smaller than normal for late November.

Some 46 percent of the state is still in extreme drought, 14 percent in severe drought and 4 percent in moderate drought.

The precipitation has benefited the Yakima River Basin reservoirs in the South Cascades. The five reservoirs on Nov. 27 held 102 percent of their average amount for the date, according to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. The reservoirs were below 40 percent of normal by the end of the irrigation season in late October.

The reservoirs still have less water than they did at this

time a year ago. Ample precipitation swelled reservoirs last winter, but low snowpacks led to water rationing in the Yakima Valley.

There has been little change in drought conditions this month in Oregon, Idaho and California.

Some 96 percent of Oregon is in some drought stage, including 60 percent in extreme drought. In Idaho, 67 percent of the state is in drought, including 9 percent in extreme drought. Some 97 percent of California is in a drought, with 45 percent in "exceptional" drought, the most-severe classification.

The Drought Monitor is a partnership between the U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Yakima Valley irrigators want more Kachess Lake water

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

SUNNYSIDE, Wash. — Roza Irrigation District is pushing ahead with a \$58 million project to get more water out of Kachess Lake if the Central Washington drought continues next summer.

The district, one of the largest in the Yakima Valley, is doing so despite a possible lawsuit from some lake residents who don't want the lake drawn down another 18 feet below its current lowest level.

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lake's outflow.

The Roza received 47 percent of normal water this past season due to the drought. An additional 50,000 acre feet would have raised that to 55 percent, said Scott Revell, district manager.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation is now estimating junior water right holders, including the Roza and Kittitas Reclamation District, could be as low as 27 to 35 percent of normal water next year if there's a repeat of low snowpack this year, Revell said.

"In that case, we would probably have two shutdowns of two weeks each in the spring (instead of the one this year) and a trickle all summer and end the season early," Revell said. "It would be far worse than what we just went through."

Revell sent a letter in August to the Bureau of Reclamation which manages the five reservoirs and water deliveries to irrigation districts. Revell

proposed floating pumps for Kachess to get more irrigation water.

The bureau is holding meetings to gather public comment at the: Hal Holmes Center in Ellensburg, Dec. 7; the USFS ranger station, 802 2nd Ave., Cle Elum, Dec. 8; and at the Best Western in Sunnyside, Dec. 9. All meetings are 4 to 7 p.m.

The Roza has to work through about a dozen local, state and federal agencies to gain approval and is on a very tight time line to have pumps operational by July 1, Revell said.

"There are a lot of moving parts, but so far they all appear to be moving in the same direction," he said.

One exception maybe some Kachess Lake residents concerned about their wells and bull trout.

"There likely will be a lawsuit. They've hired lawyers," Revell said.

Some dairy owners in the

Roza also don't favor the project because it's not cost effective for them, Revell said. The same is true for some growers in Kittitas Valley.

The Kittitas Reclamation District hasn't joined the project. Its manager is trying to figure how to assess just those who want it. Revell is trying to do the same in the Roza, but said it is difficult to separate out users from non-users for assessments and water deliveries.

So far, the plan is for Roza growers to pay \$85 per acre per year over 10 years to pay for a loan for the project. Costs and assessments are being tuned and there could be savings in acquiring slightly used pumps from the Southern Nevada Water Authority in Las Vegas.

The project would be similar but not the same as a Yakima Basin Integrated Water Resource Management Plan to pump more water from the lake several years from now.