

Drought takes a holiday

Snow, rain welcome present for parched Western states

Staff report

With heavy rains falling on much of the West Coast and snow piling up in the mountains, the Western drought seems to be taking a much-needed Christmas vacation.

In Washington, soaking from an abnormally wet December, officials say they will let the state's drought declaration expire next week.

"If things change as we move through the winter, we can consider another drought declaration," state Department of Ecology spokesman Dan Partridge said Dec. 22. "We'll keep an eye on El Nino forecasts but hope for continued improvement."

The state's Executive Water Emergency Committee met and decided there is no reason to foresee summer water supplies will drop below 75 percent of normal anywhere in the state.

Snowpacks so far this season are above normal throughout the state, including in the Cascades and Olympic Mountains. Meanwhile, rain is filling the five Yakima River Basin reservoirs, also important for irrigation in the state's most valuable farm region. The reservoirs held 127 percent of their average amount of water for Dec. 22.

U.S. Drought Monitor reported Dec. 17. A week earlier, one-third of Washington was in extreme drought.

In California, the big storms that have peppered the state in December have slowly fed depleted reservoirs while pushing snow levels in the northern and central Sierra Nevada above normal for this time of year.

As of Dec. 22, the average snow-water equivalent of 10.5 inches in the central Sierra was 121 percent of normal for the date, while the average snow-water equivalent of 9.8 inches in the north was 118 percent of normal, according to the state Department of Water Resources.

That's a big improvement over just a week earlier, when Central California had 83 percent of its normal snowpack for the date and Northern California had 81 percent, according to the DWR's California Data Exchange Center.

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SWEET DEBATE



Sugar processors, confectioners react to consumers' GMO demands

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

The Hershey Co. makes no claims that its sweets are safer or more healthful now that it's avoiding sugar made from genetically modified beets.

In fact, the Pennsylvania-based confectioner agrees with U.S. sugar beet growers that all finished sugar is the same, whether it's processed from GMO sugar beets or conventional sugar cane.

Perry Cerminara, director of commodities sourcing and procurement at Hershey, said the company started buying mostly non-GMO sugar — including 100 percent GMO-free cane sugar for its key U.S. brands — simply to give customers what they want, even if Hershey doesn't necessarily share their concerns about biotechnology.

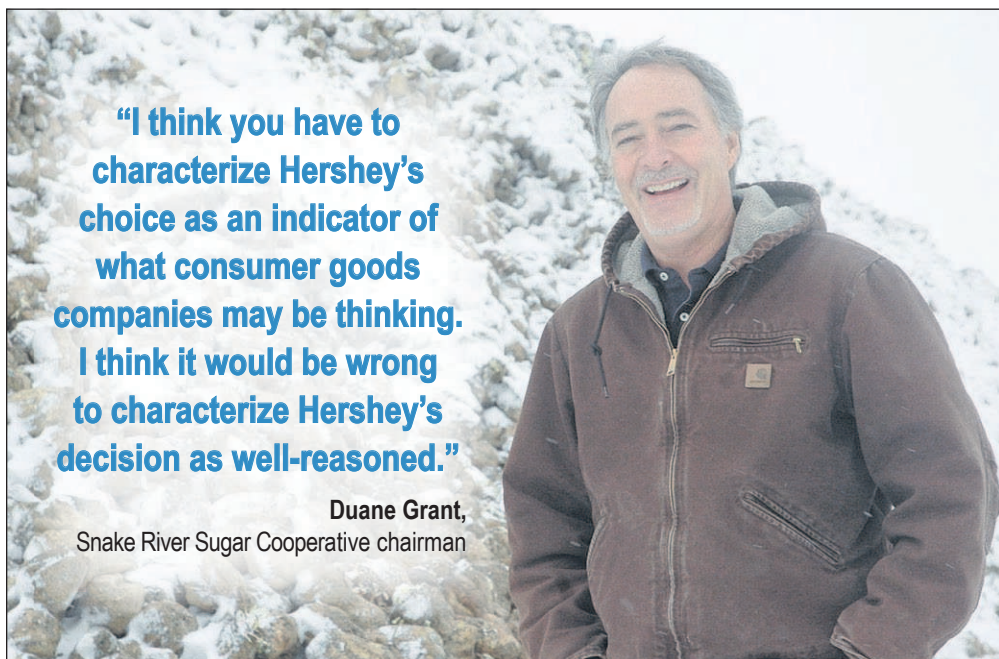
"As a consumer-centric company, we listen to our consumers and work to respond to their interests and expectations," Cerminara told Capital Press via email. "Non-GM ingredients is something our consumers are telling us is important to them."

Organic and GMO-free sugar still represent a tiny percentage of the overall U.S. sweetener market. But the sugar beet industry is starting to take notice of the continued growth of both niche categories — and is growing increasingly concerned that more corporate buyers will reach the same conclusion as Hershey.

The sugar industry estimates its annual impact on the American economy is more than \$20 billion. Almost all of the sugar beets planted in the U.S. are genetically modified, containing a foreign gene to resist glyphosate herbicide. For the time being, America's sugar beet industry — which encompasses 1.2 million acres in 11 states and represents 56 percent of U.S. sugar production — has no plans to invest in separate infrastructure for processing GMO-free or organic sugar, or to ask any growers to return to conventional beet production.

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"I think you have to characterize Hershey's choice as an indicator of what consumer goods companies may be thinking. I think it would be wrong to characterize Hershey's decision as well-reasoned."

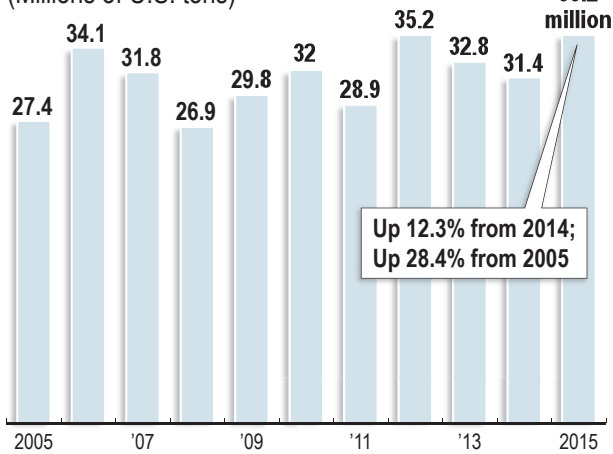
Duane Grant,
Snake River Sugar Cooperative chairman

John O'Connell/Capital Press

Duane Grant, chairman of Snake River Sugar Cooperative, stands by a snow-capped pile of sugar beets in Rupert, Idaho. Grant believes genetically modified sugar beets have saved his industry, and that they offer a far more environmentally friendly option than organic or conventional sugar.

U.S. sugar beet production

(Millions of U.S. tons)



Source: USDA NASS

Alan Kenagal/Capital Press

Farmers must disclose field locations in GMO settlement

Settlement covers alfalfa growers in Oregon County

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Farmers who don't want to remove genetically engineered alfalfa crops in Oregon's Jackson County must submit their field locations to attorneys representing biotech critics.

They will also have to harvest the alfalfa before it reaches 10 percent bloom, to reduce the cross-pollination risks, and monitor nearby roadways for volunteers.



Capital Press file

Farmers who don't want to remove genetically engineered alfalfa crops in Oregon's Jackson County must submit their field locations to attorneys representing biotech critics.

These terms are part of a settlement deal resolving a lawsuit that challenged the county's prohibition against

genetically engineered crops, which voters passed last year.

On Dec. 22, U.S. Magistrate Judge Mark Clarke approved the settlement, which allows biotech alfalfa growers to grow their crops for eight years despite the ban.

In exchange, the alfalfa growers who filed the lawsuit, Schulz Family Farms and James and Marilyn Frink, agree not to appeal an earlier ruling that held the ordinance doesn't violate Oregon's "right to farm" law. That statute disallows county governments from restricting common farming practices.

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