

Farmers optimistic about snowpack levels in Owyhee Basin

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — A series of snowstorms over the Owyhee Basin has resulted in snowpack levels more than twice their normal amount for this time of year.

That has given farmers in Eastern Oregon who get their irrigation water from the Owyhee Reservoir a reason to be optimistic for the first time in several years.

The basin has experienced four straight years of reduced snowpack levels and the 1,800 farms that depend on the reservoir have had their annual water allotment slashed by two-thirds the past two years.

Water has stopped flowing through the Owyhee Irrigation District's 400 miles of canals, laterals and ditches in August the past two years, two months earlier than normal.

But as of Dec. 24, snowpack in the basin was at 233 percent of normal for that date.

"I'm really pleased with what I'm seeing so far," said dairyman and farmer Frank Ausman, a member of the Owyhee Irrigation District's board of directors. "We're sitting quite a bit better at this time than we were the last couple of years."

But Ausman and other farmers said the snow needs to keep falling in order for

growers to have an adequate water supply next season.

"It's definitely ... a good start but it's a little early to start counting our chickens," Ausman said.

OID Manager Jay Chamberlin said the storms have laid down a lot of snow proportionally over the whole watershed, unlike last year when the sparse snow the basin received was spotty.

"Keep it coming. This feels good," he said.

The reservoir provides water for 118,000 irrigated acres in Malheur County in southeastern Oregon and around Homedale and Marsing in southwestern Idaho.

Farmers in this area have

had to alter their rotations and farming practices as a result of drastically reduced water supplies the last three years. A lot of farm ground has been left idle and growers have planted a lot more crops that require less water but also bring less income.

While farmers and water supply managers expressed optimism at the current snowpack situation in the basin, they also cautioned that it's still early in the snow season and the reservoir needs a lot more water.

To guarantee a good water supply year, the reservoir needs about 450,000 acre-feet of storage water, Chamberlin said. It's holding about 50,000 acre-feet right now.

"We're going into 2016 in a lot better shape than we did the last three years," Chamberlin said. "But we have a whole lot of room in an empty bucket. We can take whatever (is sent) us."

Farmer Paul Skeen likened the current water situation to being early in a football game. While farmers are leading, there's a lot of ballgame left, he said.

"Yes, things don't look nearly as bleak as they did last year," said Skeen, president of the Malheur County Union Growers Association. "But we're a long ways from the fourth quarter. We're just finishing the first quarter of the game."



Dan Heath Capital Press

Arion Carlson places a tray of Red Delicious apples into a 40-pound box at McDougall Sons packing plant in East Wenatchee, Wash., last April. Red Delicious are a prime export variety to India, China, Mexico and other countries.

India restricts foreign apples at some of its ports

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — India has closed all but one of its seaports to imported apples, which may result in a 50 percent reduction in Washington apples going there in the 2015-2016 sales season.

"It's very difficult to say" if the situation will be resolved any time soon, said Mark Powers, executive vice president of the Northwest Horticultural Association in Yakima. He arrived home Dec. 18 after a week of meetings with government officials and importers in India trying to get restrictions lifted.

"Domestic politics" caused the closure in September but apples are still allowed into Nhava Sheva, a main port on the western side of the country near Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay, Powers said. Chennai is the leading port in the southeast that is closed, he said.

Powers would not elaborate on the "domestic politics." It appears to be protectionism of India's apple industry, according to reports in fruit trade publications, Asiafruit and Fresh Plaza.

The U.S., Chile, New Zealand and the European Union complained to the World Trade Organization and were told to sort out the issue with India, The Hindu BusinessLine reported.

India has had a 50-percent tariff on foreign apples for years. India producers want that increased but the government can't under WTO rules. India is the world's fifth largest apple producer but also imports apples with about half coming from China.

India has been in the top five of Washington apple export markets for several years. Last season, India imported

Report of Mexican Christmas tree rejections baffles farmers

Currency, price fluctuations blamed for export decline

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Mexican authorities have reportedly doubled their rejections of U.S. Christmas trees due to pests this year, which is baffling to some domestic farmers and regulators.

Overall Mexican demand for U.S. Christmas trees has also fallen due to rising prices and currency fluctuations, but the problem isn't a top concern for growers as the domestic market was strong, experts say.

"It is an improvement over previous years," said Rick Schaefer, whose family owns Holiday Specialtrees of Woodburn, Ore.

Importers in Mexico have said "bah humbug" to this year's Christmas tree crop, primarily because the peso has fallen in value against the dollar by about 18 percent since late 2014, making U.S. products more expensive in that country, according to a recent USDA report.

Mexico's Federal Attorney for Environmental Protection also rejected more than 18,000 U.S. trees due to problems with pests, mostly weevils, which is twice as many as in 2014, the report said.

Those figures don't square with reports received by farm regulators in Oregon, which is the predominant exporter of Christmas trees to Mexico.

Information received by the Oregon Department of Agriculture indicates that rejections had fallen since last year, said Gary McAninch, manager of the agency's nursery and Christmas tree program.

"We thought the pest pressure was less than in years past," he said.

However, it is possible ODA hasn't yet been notified of all the rejections, McAninch said.

The data contained in USDA's report also surprised Chal Landgren, Oregon State University's Christmas tree specialist.

A potential explanation is that the drought weakened some trees this year, which may have attracted more twig weevils, he said. "They're sort of a stress indicator."

Holiday Tree Farms of Corvallis, Ore., a major producer, hasn't noticed an increase in



Mateusz Perkowski Capital Press

growers bale Christmas trees prior to shipment in this Capital Press file photo. Exports to Mexico have dropped but the domestic market for trees is healthy, experts say.

rejections from Mexico, said Greg Rondeau, its sales manager.

If there was a sharp spike in overall rejections, it was probably linked to the higher cost of trees for Mexican importers, Rondeau said.

"They may have been inclined to buy lesser quality trees to save money," he said.

While the reasons for the increased pest incidents are unclear, experts say the USDA is correct in reporting that exports are down.

Tree supplies are tightening, causing domestic prices to rise, said Bryan Ostlund, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Christmas Tree Association.

With a healthy domestic market, farmers are less inclined to export trees and face potential problems at the border, Ostlund

said. "Any export comes with a level of risk."

Exact prices vary depending on the contract between the farmer and buyer, but this year's

wholesale prices are in the range of \$24 per Noble fir and \$18 per Douglas fir, he said.

That's a major improvement from recent years, when prices fell as low as \$6 per Douglas fir and \$8 per Noble fir due to a major glut of trees, according to previous reports in Capital Press.

That oversupply prompted growers to reduce plantings, said Tyler Stone, whose family owns the BTN of Oregon farm near Salem.

"We're probably going to be short for the next couple of years," he said. "There's not as many Christmas trees as there used to be."

Buyers who had grown accustomed to the abundance of trees will now have to change their habits, said Schaefer of Holiday Specialtrees.

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