

Washington

Wash. snowpack is looking good

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — Mountain snowpack looks a whole lot better in Washington than it has at this time the last two years, and Yakima Basin reservoir storage also is good.

Statewide snowpack was 120 percent of normal on Jan. 4 compared with 49 percent at this time last year and 44 percent two years ago.

But temperatures are about to rise and precipitation will slow down in keeping with an El Nino weather pattern, said Scott Pattee, water supply specialist at the Washington Snow Survey Office of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Mount Vernon.

“If we can get maintenance storms and keep a buffer of snowpack we will be OK. If it totally shuts off and warms up, I’m not saying we will be in drought again but we would be water short in some locations,” Pattee said.

Snowpack constitutes two-thirds of the irrigation supply of 464,000 acres of farmland in the Kittitas and Yakima valleys. One-third is stored in five lake reservoirs.

Odds are maintenance storms will come and there will be sufficient summer water, he said.

As of Jan. 4, the Spokane basin snowpack was the lowest in the state at 87 percent of normal. The upper Columbia (Okanogan

and Methow rivers) was 129 percent. The central Columbia (Chelan, Entiat and Wenatchee) was 112, the upper Yakima was 113 and the lower Yakima, 120. The lower Columbia was 118, central Puget Sound (from Cascade crest to lowlands) 115 and the Olympics, 135.

All of those regions were well below 100 percent a year ago.

The first April to September streamflow forecasts will be around 100 percent of normal, Pattee said.

The 2015 drought illuminated the criticalness of snowpack, he said.

Rainfall and snowfall were down in prior state droughts, but 2015 saw ample mountain rain but little snow, he said.

“We were able to tie low streamflows directly to lack of snowfall. I don’t think any of us knew how critical it is, but the math is there now,” he said.

Meanwhile, the five reservoirs serving the Yakima Basin are 124 percent of average for this time of year. Keechelus, Kachess, Cle Elum, Bumping and Rimrock all total 55 percent of capacity as of Jan. 3, said Chris Lynch, hydrologist for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation’s Yakima Project in Yakima.

“Things look good,” Lynch said. “We’re back into a more normal mode for now. You never know how the winds will shift, but we hope we will get some more winter and keep building snowpack.”



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Snow-covered terrain along Interstate 82 lies between Yakima and Ellensburg, Wash., on Dec. 30. The snowpack is 120 percent of normal.

Seattle’s minimum wage moves toward \$15 an hour

SEATTLE (AP) — Seattle’s minimum wage took another step toward \$15 an hour on Friday.

Depending on the size of the business and whether the employees have health insurance, workers in Seattle now make as much as \$13 an hour minimum.

In November, voters in Tacoma approved a graduated increase to \$12 an hour.

The statewide minimum in Washington is \$9.47 an hour for the second year. It is no longer the highest in the nation, as Massachusetts and California both increased to \$10.

Alaska’s minimum wage, at \$9.75 an hour, also is higher than Washington’s. Other states with higher statewide wages include Connecticut and Rhode Island.

Wilson Creek grain elevator fire under investigation

Fire chief: Structures are a ‘total loss’

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Grant County deputy fire marshals are investigating a fire at a Wilson Creek, Wash., grain elevator.

The fire was reported shortly after 2 p.m. Jan. 2 at the Wilson Creek Union Grain and Trading elevator, said Scott Mortimer, chief of Grant County Fire District 12.

Mortimer had not talked with the company about the cost of the damage. Manager Nick Wride declined to comment at this time.

The cause is still undetermined, Mortimer said.

The fire occurred in a wood-cribbed elevator and binhouse containing wheat and canola, Mortimer said. Both are a “total loss,” he said. At least one of the buildings had been in operation since the 1940s.

“There’s a tremendous amount of wood in these old elevators,” Mortimer said.

Neither was completely full. The elevator was more than 100 feet tall, Mortimer said.

Particularly at harvest, grain stored unintentionally with a high moisture content can be subject to spontaneous combustion, Mortimer said.

If a cause for the Wilson Creek fire is ultimately determined, it could be due to the structure, he said.

What remained of the structure and its contents was still burning Jan. 4, Mortimer said.

“It’s likened to a major haystack,” he said. “When you get



Photo courtesy Dan Bolyard

Crews battle a fire in the Wilson Creek Union Grain and Trading Co. grain elevator the afternoon of Jan. 2 in Wilson Creek, Wash. Grant County deputy fire marshals are investigating.



Photo courtesy Dan Bolyard

A fire burns in the Wilson Creek Union Grain and Trading Co. grain elevator the afternoon of Jan. 2 in Wilson Creek, Wash. Grant County deputy fire marshals are investigating.

something of that size and that amount of combustible, conversely you can’t put enough water on it to extinguish it.”

The building is near a BNSF Railway rail. A train

BNSF spokesman Gus Melonas said the railroad temporarily closed the rail line to inspect it.

“We had a train going by simultaneously as the fire be-

gan,” Melonas said.

The railroad determined it was safe to continue with operations after a few hours and resumed its normal traffic flow.

The fire marshals were slated to inspect the site, but snow could slow the process, Mortimer said.

“The snowfall we got last night probably helped in maintaining the perimeter on the fire,” he said. “The precipitation did not hamper suppression efforts, although icing created some potential hazards as we applied several hundred thousand gallons of water.”

Grant County Fire District 5, the City of Ephrata Fire Department, Grant County Fire District 13 and Grant County Public Utility District provided assistance, Mortimer said.

Direct seed conference covers soil, UAVs

Wireworms, soil acidity among other hot topics

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

The Pacific Northwest Direct Seed Association’s cropping systems conference is Jan. 12-13 at the Three Rivers Convention Center in Kennewick, Wash.

The conference aims to help growers overcome problems and develop production strategies, said Kay Meyer, executive director of the association.

Direct-seeding systems seed and fertilize land directly into the crop residue

Online

<http://www.directseed.org/events/annual-conference/>

and root structure of the previous year’s crop. Specialized equipment opens a narrow seed row in the soil, and plants grow through that seed row. Other conventional types of farming involve tillage that turns over the soil.

North Dakota farmer Gabe Brown is the keynote speaker. He will talk about his “regenerative soil” methods on his farm, using cover crops, crop rotations and cattle.

“He’s been able to reduce all of his inputs except seed and he has consistently been over the county averages in his yields,” Meyer said.

Brown will offer his recommendations for rotations within the region.

A panel discussion will cover the use of unmanned aerial vehicles and offers viewpoints from a farmer, an agricultural business company and a manufacturer, xCraft, based in Sandpoint, Idaho.

Soil health and cover crops are the hottest topics, Meyer said.

“We’re trying to get those cover crops really working for us in our rotations and the limited moisture we have in the summer months,” Meyer said.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Pacific Northwest Direct Seed Association executive director Kay Meyer talks about her organization’s Farmed Smart certification program Jan. 22, 2015, during the association’s conference in Kennewick, Wash. This year’s conference will cover soil practices and unmanned aerial vehicle use.

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