Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Potatoes are harvested in a field near Ontario, Ore., in August. Farmers in Eastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho who get their irrigation water from the Owyhee Reservoir are looking at a much better water supply this year.

Water situation in Malheur County vastly improved from recent years

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — The Owyhee Reservoir could provide the 1,800 farms in Eastern Oregon and part of Idaho that depend on it for irrigation a normal water supply for the first time in four years.

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

Snowpack levels in the Owyhee Basin, which feeds the Owyhee River and the reservoir, have been bleak the past four years and the Owyhee Irrigation District has only been able to provide the irrigators who depend on the reservoir a significantly reduced portion of their normal 4 acre-foot allotment the past two years.

OID patrons received 1.7 acre-feet last year and 1.6 acre-feet in 2014.

As a result, farmers have left a lot of farm ground idle and switched many fields to less water-intensive crops that are also less lucrative.

But snowpack levels were well above normal for much of this winter and the reservoir is filling fast.

"It's going to be significantly better than last year," said Oregon farmer Bruce Corn, a member of the OID's board of directors. "It certainly looks promising."

The reservoir peaked at 205,000 acre-feet of usable storage water last year but was already closing in on 300,000 acre-feet as of March 8, according to OID Manager Jay Chamberlin.

"We're feeling pretty good about the outlook," he said.

Reservoir in-flow levels have varied between 3,000 and 5,000 cubic feet per second recently, which means the reservoir is receiving between 6,000 and 10,000 acre-feet of water every day.

Chamberlin said it takes more than 400,000 acre-feet in the reservoir for every OID patron to receive their full 4 acre-foot allotment.

While there is still a ways to go before that level is reached, "I think there's a pretty good chance we'll have a full allotment this year," Corn said.

Chamberlin, who flew over the basin two weeks ago, said snowpack levels are at the point now where it would be helpful if warmer temperatures or some good rainstorms flushed the rest of it off the mountains and into the reservoir quickly. Otherwise, a lot of the water could seep into the soil and never reach the reservoir.

"We're hoping that the rains predicted for later this week will really flush that stuff out and into the reservoir," he said March 8.

Corn said the ground in the valley is wet and stock ponds are full, which means river flows should respond quickly if the predicted rains do materialize.

Farmers in the region are more optimistic heading into this season than they have been in several years because of the improved water situation, said Nyssa farmer Paul Skeen, president of the Malheur County Onion Growers Association.

"People are very optimistic they will get their full allotment," he said.

The OID will hold its annual meeting March 22 at the Four Rivers Cultural Center in Ontario and could announce a tentative 2016 allotment then.

Nampa Ag Forum plans to highlight important role ag plays in local economy

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

NAMPA, Idaho — The Nampa Chamber of Commerce will host an Ag Forum on March 16 so farmers, agribusiness representatives and members of the local non-farm business community can discuss agriculture's importance to Canyon County.

In its third year, the event is meant to raise awareness of the important role agriculture plays in Canyon County and to discuss issues relevant to the farming and ranching community, said Debbie Kling, president and CEO of the chamber.

"The economic impact of agriculture is substantial in our communities, and the event brings businesses and agriculture together to look at what our needs are in the future," she said.

The event also affords farmers a chance to connect directly with non-farm businesses, said Middleton farmer Sid Freeman, who will be part of a panel that will discuss ag-related issues.

"This is a phenomenal opportunity for the agricultural industry to rub elbows with the local business community," said Freeman, a board member of Canyon County Farm Bureau, which is helping sponsor the event. "In agriculture, we are always preaching to the choir. This gives us that opportunity to go outside of the choir."

Though one of Idaho's smallest counties in size, Canyon County ranks No. 5 when it comes to farm-gate receipts — $513 million according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture — and it has 2,333 farmers, by far the most in the state.

"Canyon County has a rich and dynamic agricultural heritage," Idaho State Department of Agriculture Director Celia Gould said in an email. "I am grateful to the Nampa chamber for hosting the Ag Forum to highlight the importance of an industry that continues to be the lifeblood of Canyon County and beyond."

The county is also experiencing rapid growth and a panel of agribusiness representatives will discuss how that could affect agriculture.

"I see tremendous growth taking place in Canyon County," Kling said. "With that growth, we need to continue to raise awareness of the importance of agriculture in the county and what the impact of that growth might be on agriculture."

Nate McKnight, manager of a Canyon County Darigold facility, also plans to discuss the labor challenges the industry faces.

"It's definitely a good thing we're talking about these issues and we're pleased to see this event take place," he said.

Wendell Robinson, agriculture manager for Amalgamated Sugar Co., will discuss recent federal legislation that will allow Idaho to increase its interstate highway truck weight limit.