

Drought returns to Washington’s westside

Rain deficit deepens in SW corner of state

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

For the first time in nine months, drought has crept back into Western Washington, with the U.S. Drought Monitor classifying all or parts of five counties in “moderate drought.”

Conditions remain far better than last August, when the entire state was in “severe drought” or worse. Still, a rapid snow melt in April and a recent hot spell have brought drought to all or parts of Grays Harbor, Lewis, Mason, Pacific and Wahkiakum counties.

“We’ve been really dry in August, which isn’t surprising, we don’t expect much precipitation, but that area in particular has had a big precipitation deficit,” Washington State Assistant Climatologist Karin Bumbaco said.

After one of the worst droughts in state history, a return to more normal weather erased the drought in Western Washington by late November last year and throughout the state by late March.

The Drought Monitor, a partnership between the federal government and the University of Nebraska, has classified about 4 percent of the state in southeastern Washington as being in a moderate drought all summer.

On Aug. 25, the monitor added the southwest corner, approximately doubling the percentage of the state in drought to nearly 8 percent. The rest of the state is classified as abnormally dry.

Pacific County cranberry grower Malcolm McPhail said he’s had to irrigate bogs more often in the heat, in some cas-



Don Jenkins/Capital Press
An irrigation pond at a cranberry farm in Long Beach, Wash., shows the effects Aug. 25 of a hot and dry summer. A portion of Western Washington, including Long Beach, is in a drought, the U.S. Drought Monitor reported.



Don Jenkins/Capital Press
A sprinkler shoots water over a cranberry bog in Long Beach, Wash. A hot and dry summer that forced growers to irrigate more often. The U.S. Drought Monitor reported Aug. 25 that a portion of Southwest Washington, including Long Beach, is in a drought.

es pumping water from dwindling water supplies.

“We’re definitely seeing the water situation in the ponds,” he said. “This would be the second-driest summer I can recall.”

The return of drought to southwest Washington is unlikely to mean new restrictions on water rights, Department of Ecology officials said.

Ecology had already curtailed the water rights of 93 irrigators in the Chehalis River Basin.

The water rights were issued after the state adopted minimum flow standards for the basin’s river and tributaries in 1976.

Ecology issued the curtailment notices May 20 after a warm April melted the basin’s low-elevation snow. Although conditions were more severe last summer, water use in the basin wasn’t curtailed until July.

“Based on our experience of last summer, we were looking at all of our basins statewide,” said Mike Gallagher, Ecology’s southwest region water manager. “The warm April really made a difference this year.”

Also in Western Washington, Ecology again curtailed water rights to a handful of irrigators in Whatcom County and two irrigation districts in Skagit County.

No further curtailments are being prepared in northwestern Washington, an Ecology spokesman said.

In early August, Ecology issued curtailment notices to 14 irrigators along the

Tucannon River and Asotin Creek in southeastern Washington, but none since then, Ecology drought relief coordinator Jeff Marti said.

“Although conditions are much below normal, we are doing much better than last year,” he said.

In a sign of improved conditions, 45 percent of Washington’s streams were lower than normal Friday, compared to 85 percent on the same date last year, according to a network of 148 gauges maintained by the U.S. Geological Survey.

The state declares a drought emergency in areas projected to suffer economic hardship because water supplies fall 75 percent below normal.

Marti said water supplies in parts of southwest Washington are likely to be below the threshold.

“It isn’t apparent there is going to be widespread hardship,” he said.

Cranberry growers on the coast reaped a near-record crop last year after August rains helped replenish ponds in time to flood bogs for the harvest.

Bird flu resurfaces in Alaska

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

A mallard duck in Alaska has tested positive for highly pathogenic bird flu, the first case among wild birds in the U.S. since November.

The live duck was among 188 birds sampled by game managers at a former dairy farm that’s been converted into a wildlife refuge near Fairbanks, officials said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture and Alaska’s state veterinarian confirmed Friday the bird was infected with a strain similar to the H5N2 virus that first appeared in the U.S. in mid-December 2014 in a wild duck in Whatcom County, Wash.

More tests must be done to determine whether the virus is identical or represents a new strain introduced from East Asia, said Andy Ramey, a U.S. Geological Service research scientist in Alaska.

“Today’s announcement is kind of a teaser,” he said “It’s really an important finding certainly and a concerning finding for the (poultry) industry.”

Wild birds are not sickened by avian influenza, but pass the virus along to domestic poultry, which are vulnerable to the disease. Infected flocks are euthanized to prevent the spread of the virus.

In 2015, bird flu spread to poultry in 15 states and killed some 48 million chickens and turkeys in what the USDA called the worst animal-health disaster in U.S. history.

To better trace the spread of bird flu in the wild, 45,549 birds were sampled in the U.S. between July 2015 and June 2016, according to the USDA.

Only two — a duck in Utah and a duck in Morrow County, Ore. — appeared to have had highly pathogenic bird flu, though even in those cases tests were inconclusive.

Bird flu was much easier to find in the wild in the first six

A mallard duck swims in a lake in Washington state. A strain of highly pathogenic bird flu similar to one that first appeared in the U.S. in a duck in Washington state in 2014 has resurfaced in a duck in Alaska, officials said Aug. 26.

months of 2015. The USDA reported testing 7,084 wild birds nationwide and confirming highly pathogenic bird flu in 65.

Since July 1, another 4,157 wild birds have been sampled, including 371 in Alaska.

Previously, Alaska had never had a confirmed case of highly pathogenic bird flu, though federal scientists say monitoring for the virus there is important.

Birds from Asia and North America mingle and migratory pathways overlap, allowing new strains to form and be carried throughout the United States. The virus that killed millions of birds in 2015 was a mix of Eurasian and North American strains and infected poultry from Washington to Arkansas.

Considering the vastness of Alaska’s migratory bird population, it’s possible the virus has just gone undetected until now, Ramey said. “We’re sampling frankly only a small percentage of the population,” he said.

Alaska State Veterinarian Bob Gerlach said that while game managers were sampling ducks at the refuge for bird flu, he was blocks away at a fair collecting poultry samples.

“We’re going to continue with our surveillance, and we’re increasing our outreach to people, encouraging them to report sick and dead birds,” he said. “We don’t have a large (poultry) facility. We do have a large number of backyard facilities.”

Sorghum facility would provide farmers with stable rotation crop

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

PARMA, Idaho — A planned \$90 million sorghum processing facility will give farmers in the region a new rotation crop that fetches a stable price every year.

The facility, Treasure Valley Renewables, will also use waste from dairies and other agricultural sources.

“This is an absolutely great project for this area,” said Neill Goodfellow, director of Agrienergy Producers Association, a 25-farmer cooperative

that will grow the sorghum used by the facility. “It will give farmers a stable price for that crop year after year.”

Nyssa, Ore., farmer Charlie Barlow, one of the farmers who will grow the sorghum, said the project has been several years in the making, and

it’s exciting to see it start to come together.

Having a new rotation crop will be a big benefit to growers, he said.

In years like this, when commodity prices are depressed, that would mean lot, he said.

“It gives us a stable crop, something we can count on year in and year out,” he said. “It would probably be a middle of the road type rotation crop, a little bit better than some of the rotation crops we have now.”

But, he added, sorghum won’t replace the area’s main cash crops such as onions, potatoes and sugar beets.

Kurt Christensen, one of the project organizers, said the facility will handle about 1,500 acres of sorghum a year. The high-biomass sorghum was developed specifically to be high in fiber.

The fiber will be pulped

and molded into paper products used by the restaurant industry.

The facility will include an anaerobic digester plant that will use the sorghum by-product and agricultural and food waste to produce electricity and compressed natural gas.

While the facility will consider any type of agricultural waste that would work in the digester, “dairy waste is an important part of that,” Christensen said.

Byproducts produced at the facility will include fertilizer, compost and livestock bedding for local farmers, ranchers and dairies.

The biogas produced by the digester facility will be compressed and put into a commercial natural gas pipeline and used for dual-fuel vehicles.

Organizers provided details of the project to area res-

idents Aug. 25 during a neighborhood meeting at Parma City Hall.

The 48-acre site is off Shelton Road, where Highway 95 and Highway 26 meet.

For the project to move forward, the property must be rezoned from agricultural to heavy industrial.

There was no opposition to the project at the meeting, though there were questions about possible noise, traffic, odor and lighting impacts.

Christensen said the company will do everything it can to mitigate any possible impacts.

“We really want to be good neighbors,” he said.

Organizers said the entire project will take about 17-19 months to complete. Some parts, such as the digester facility, which will provide the electricity to run the sorghum plant, are expected to be operational next year.

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