

# Yakima reservoir levels low but adequate



Dan Wheat/Capital Press  
The stump-strewn shoreline surrounds Keechelus Lake at Snoqualmie Pass in Washington state on Aug. 28. The lake can hold 157,800 acre-feet of water. It was at 31,190 acre-feet on Sept. 6 and reached 14,228 acre-feet last October. It provides irrigation water to the Yakima Basin.

By DAN WHEAT  
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — Five mountain water reservoirs serving the Yakima Basin will likely finish the irrigation season with less water than normal but in better shape than after last year's drought.

The five — Keechelus, Kachess, Cle Elum, Bumping and Rimrock — total 1,065,400 acre-feet of water when full. They were at 422,430 acre-feet, or 40 percent of capacity, on Sept. 6.

Last year they bottomed out at 107,323 acre-feet on Oct. 27 compared to 330,000 acre-feet the year before and a 30-year average of 270,000 acre-feet. They reached 106,487 acre-

feet in the drought year of 2005. Their record low was 51,680 acre-feet in 1973.

This October's low will probably be above 200,000 acre-feet, said Chris Lynch, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation hydrologist for the Yakima Basin Project.

"We're at 95 percent of average and in that range for awhile, staying there or slowly losing," Lynch said. "Tracking parallel to the average but below it."

Cle Elum and Keechelus are at 16 and 20 percent of capacity, respectively, and Kachess, the largest reservoir at 436,900 acre-feet capacity, is at 68 percent.

It's been the driest April through August on record at the reservoirs, he said.

But periods of cool weather have helped and there haven't been long hot streaks like last year. It's normally dry through September and October.

It rained Sept. 6. Any rain is a bonus but there's adequate water for Yakima Basin irrigators through October, Lynch said.

Irrigation covers 464,000 acres, mostly farmland. Junior water right holders are at 94 percent of normal supply, up from 86 percent in July.

Statewide, more than 600 junior water right holders in the state remain curtailed. Newhalem and Thunder creeks in Whatcom County in northwest Washington are at record lows, said Jeff Marti, drought coordinator for the state Department

of Ecology.

As of Sept. 6, 35 percent of the state's rivers were at a below-normal flow compared with 47 percent on Aug. 31 and 85 percent in late August a year ago.

The southeast corner of the state has been in moderate drought all summer and in August portions of five counties in the southwest corner were added by the U.S. Drought Monitor, a partnership of the federal government and the University of Nebraska.

On the Olympic Peninsula, the town of Forks restricted outside watering at the end of August, which is a little earlier than last year, Marti said. The town has been short of normal rainfall and its well is low, he said.



Courtesy of Union Pacific  
A Union Pacific Food Train travels near Glenshire, Calif. The railroad has established express Food Train routes, eliminating several stops, from California and from Wallula, Wash., merging them before they head to New York.

# Union Pacific starts express Food Trains in Northwest, California

By JOHN O'CONNELL  
Capital Press

POCATELLO, Idaho — Union Pacific Railroad officials have launched a new express refrigerated rail service, called the Food Train, which they say has already improved reliability and expedited food freight from the Pacific Northwest.

The Food Train originates in Wallula, Wash., starting with 25 to 30 refrigerated cars filled with regional produce. It passes through Oregon and makes its first stop in Pocatello, where the Eastern Idaho Railroad and UP short-line rail routes deliver enough food products from throughout Idaho to fill 30 more refrigerated cars. The train makes its only other stop in Chicago, where shipments bound for the Midwest are unloaded and the remaining cars merge with another new express Food Train out of Delano, Calif.

CSX Transportation crews will then take over the Food Train's operations before it completes its trek to Rotterdam, N.Y.

"Honestly, it's one of the most exciting freight developments I've heard about during my career at the Idaho State Department of Agriculture," said Laura Johnson, ISDA Marketing Bureau chief.

UP estimates the Northwest cargo will be about one-third fresh potatoes, one-third frozen potato products and one-third Washington apples, onions and seafood.

"We really weren't handling much fresh produce out of California at all," said Sam Hughes, UP's assistant vice president of food and refrigerated products. "The Food Train is fast enough that now we can handle melons, grapes and perishable fresh produce."

Hughes said the railroad started implementing the Food

Train "piece by piece" more than a year ago and added the Pocatello pickup a few months ago.

"It takes eight to nine days to get door to door," Hughes said. "It's two to four days faster, but the real gain is it's much less variable."

Now that the railroad has successfully tested the concept, Hughes said UP is preparing to start promoting it heavily, beginning with a display booth at the Produce Marketing Association's Fresh Summit in Orlando, Fla., on Oct. 14-16.

Before the Food Train, Hughes said refrigerated produce often made stops at several regional rail hubs before amassing the necessary volume for a long-haul train, and cargo had to endure extra handling.

Ryan Bybee, sales manager with Shelley-based GPOD of Idaho, which relies mostly on rail transportation, said the railroad planned the Food Train

with ample input from the fresh potato industry.

"It's helped us grow our business," Bybee said. "It's more consistent delivery for the customer. They can go on ad and buy more product."

Idaho Lt. Gov. Brad Little said the Food Train restores Pocatello's former status as a UP rail hub, while enhancing infrastructure to serve Idaho's growing food processing industry.

"We've been talking about this for a long time, that as we continue to improve our food processing the only limiting factor is our ability to get product to where the people are," Little said.

Stefan Loeb, with Watco Cos., which operates the Eastern Idaho Railroad, said rail freight is about four times more fuel efficient than trucking.

"This gives people a real competitive option to take trucks off the road," Loeb said.

# Report: 2015 a record year for Oregon grapes

By ERIC MORTENSON  
Capital Press

Oregon's 2015 wine grape harvest set a tonnage record as newer vineyards matured into production and yields increased, according to the annual Oregon Vineyard and Winery Census Report.

The census, produced by the Southern Oregon University Research Center in Ashland, showed a record harvest of 84,949 tons. More planted acreage and higher than average yields were primarily responsible, especially in the South Willamette Valley and Umpqua Valley, according to the report. Yield increased 8 percent statewide in 2015 over the previous year.

The state's 2015 production value, a product of tonnage multiplied by price, was \$171 million, up from \$168 million in 2014. The average price per ton, which varies significantly among the more than 15 varieties grown in Oregon, was \$1,958. The 2014 average price per ton was \$2,136.

One thing about Oregon's wine sector didn't deviate: Pinot noir is still the state's signature wine, and that isn't likely to change any time soon.

The state makes renowned Pinot and it commands a high price. Pinot noir made up 62 percent of planted acreage and 67 percent of vineyard production in 2015.

It's made throughout the state but the North Willamette Valley south and southwest of Portland, particularly in Yamhill County, produces most of the state's Pinot noir. Chardonnay and Pinot gris plantings are a distant second and third.

Oregon's wine production is tiny compared to California, which produces 90 percent of U.S. wine. Oregon ranks fourth, behind



Capital Press File

Wine is poured at an Oregon tasting room. A new census of Oregon wine reveals the growth of the industry.

California, Washington and New York, but the number of vineyards and wineries grew rapidly over the years as the industry spread outside the Willamette Valley. The Columbia River Gorge and Southern Oregon areas have come into their own as wine-producing regions.

The industry census, however, shows the rapid growth slowed somewhat in 2015. The number of Oregon vineyards increased 2 percent, to 1,052. The number of wineries increased to 702, up from 676 in 2014.

Michelle Kaufmann, communications manager for the Oregon Wine Board, which commissioned the annual census, said the slowing is more likely a pause before another surge of vineyard growth, especially in Eastern Oregon.

"I don't think we reached a peak in terms of planted acreage," she said.

The number of 12-bottle cases sold in the U.S., excluding Oregon, rose to 1.6 million in 2015, about 100,000 cases more than the previous year. International case sales jumped from 62,241 in 2014 to 70,608 in 2015. Canada is the biggest buyer, with 44 percent of Oregon wine exports going there.

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# Farm reps slam Washington policy on paid rest breaks

## Agency extends ruling beyond piece-rate workers

By DON JENKINS  
Capital Press

A Washington Supreme Court decision that increased pay for piece-rate farmworkers also could raise wages for some pickers paid by the hour, according to new guidance from the state Department of Labor and Industries.

The court in 2015 ruled that farmers must pay piece-rate workers separately for 10-minute rest breaks. According to L&I's instructions issued in mid-August to farmers, the ruling also applies to hourly wage earners who receive productivity bonuses at the end of the harvest.

L&I has expanded the court ruling and further complicated calculating pay, Washington Growers League Executive Di-

rector Mike Gempler said on Sept. 6.

"I just don't think it should apply to hourly workers at all," Gempler said.

"It just makes it extremely difficult to do payroll. The hassle factor on this is really high," he said. "Payroll people are going crazy."

The court's ruling stemmed from a class-action suit against Sakuma Brothers Farms, a berry grower and processor in Skagit County.

A unanimous court ruled that piece-rate workers were entitled to paid 10-minute rest breaks every four hours. Furthermore, justices ruled the pay must be based on how much a particular worker would have earned in 10 minutes of picking.

The ruling didn't address hourly wage earners. The court assumed those workers already were receiving paid breaks.

The court also didn't address whether productivity bonuses at the end of harvests

would retroactively raise rest-break pay.

According to L&I, bonuses based on production meet the definition of piece work, even for employees paid an hourly rate.

In such a case, employers must recalculate the rest-break pay the hourly worker received in the previous weeks.

Gempler said some farmers may choose to award employees who stayed to the end of the harvest a bonus not tied to productivity.

L&I has overstepped its authority by creating a policy not supported by the ruling, said Dan Fazio, director of WA-FLA, formerly known as the Washington Farm Labor Association.

"I think (L&I's) big mistake was involving hourly workers in any way, shape or form," he said. "The courts have dug themselves into a hole with a bad ruling on piece-rate issues. Let the courts dig themselves out of it."