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Azure Farms submits tentative weed plan

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

A last-minute weed management plan filed by an organic farm may be "workable" if the farm managers follow through, a Sherman County official said.

The operators of Azure Farms, a 2,000-acre organic farm on the outskirts of Moro, filed a weed management plan 24 hours before the Sherman County Court was scheduled to discuss the issue. The county had warned it would seek a quarantine on the farm if it didn't get a handle on what it describes as "rampant" noxious weeds.

County officials, responding to complaints from neighboring farmers who don't want their fields infested, said they will spray the weeds with herbicide and bill the farm for the work if necessary. The farm says it will lose valuable organic certification for three years if it uses the chemical herbicides conventional farmers use.

In an email, County Commissioner Tom McCoy said he discussed Azure Farms' plan with county weed control Supervisor Rod Asher.

"He is researching some of the measures, but believes the plan may be workable if Azure is really willing to implement it. So far, their follow through has not been good," McCoy wrote.

The Oregon Wheat Growers League urged a "prompt and rigorous review" of Azure's proposal.

"From our members on the ground, it's become clear that even a casual observation of Azure's property makes it clear that their noxious weed problem is severe and has been worsening for many years," league CEO Blake Rowe and growers Bryan Cranston and Chris Moore said in a prepared statement."

"Neighboring farms, including those at some distance from Azure, are being impacted by the spread of noxious weed seeds from Azure's property. The ability of surrounding wheat farms to continue to produce certified wheat seed and the reputation of the entire area for producing high quality wheat, with virtually no weed contamination, are at risk."

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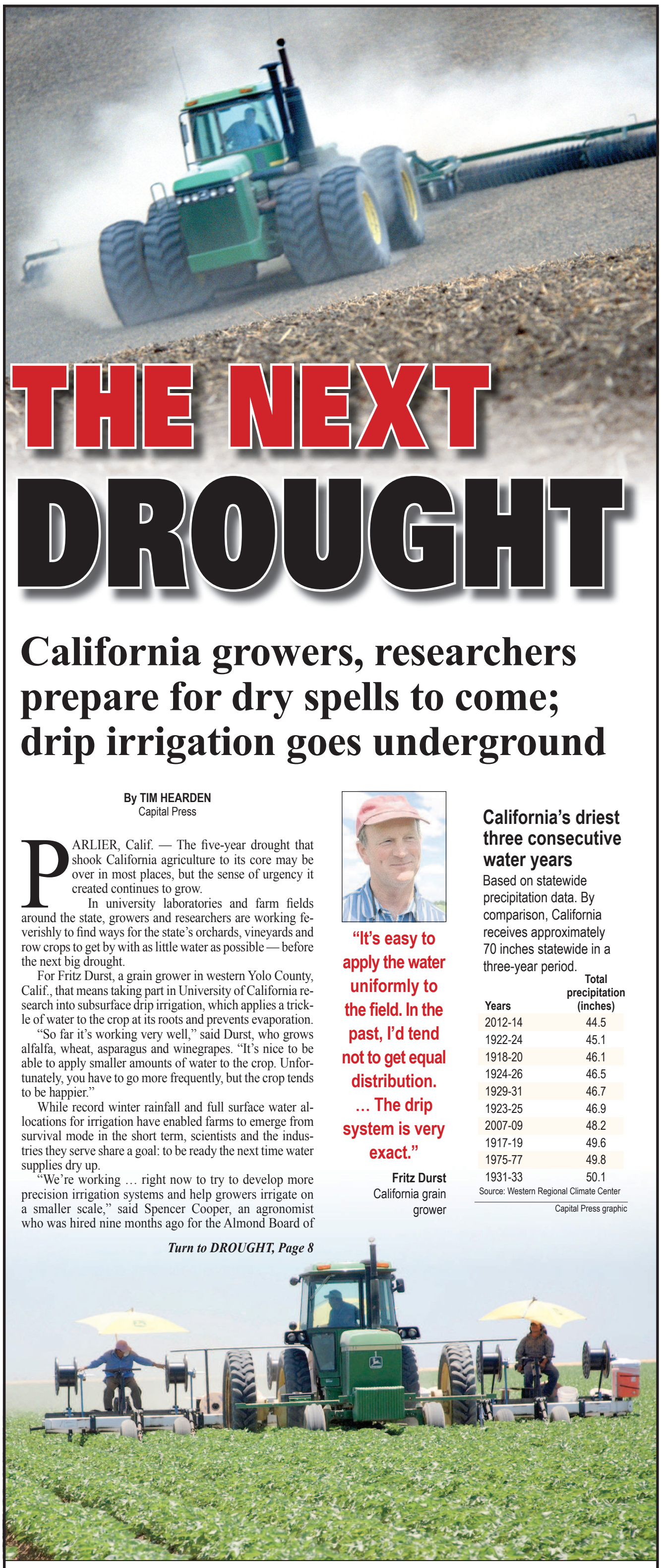

THE NEXT DROUGHT

California growers, researchers prepare for dry spells to come; drip irrigation goes underground

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

PARLIER, Calif. — The five-year drought that shook California agriculture to its core may be over in most places, but the sense of urgency it created continues to grow.

In university laboratories and farm fields around the state, growers and researchers are working feverishly to find ways for the state's orchards, vineyards and row crops to get by with as little water as possible — before the next big drought.

For Fritz Durst, a grain grower in western Yolo County, Calif., that means taking part in University of California research into subsurface drip irrigation, which applies a trickle of water to the crop at its roots and prevents evaporation.

"So far it's working very well," said Durst, who grows alfalfa, wheat, asparagus and winegrapes. "It's nice to be able to apply smaller amounts of water to the crop. Unfortunately, you have to go more frequently, but the crop tends to be happier."

While record winter rainfall and full surface water allocations for irrigation have enabled farms to emerge from survival mode in the short term, scientists and the industries they serve share a goal: to be ready the next time water supplies dry up.

"We're working … right now to try to develop more precision irrigation systems and help growers irrigate on a smaller scale," said Spencer Cooper, an agronomist who was hired nine months ago for the Almond Board of

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"It's easy to apply the water uniformly to the field. In the past, I'd tend not to get equal distribution. … The drip system is very exact."

Fritz Durst
California grain grower

California's driest three consecutive water years

Based on statewide precipitation data. By comparison, California receives approximately 70 inches statewide in a three-year period.

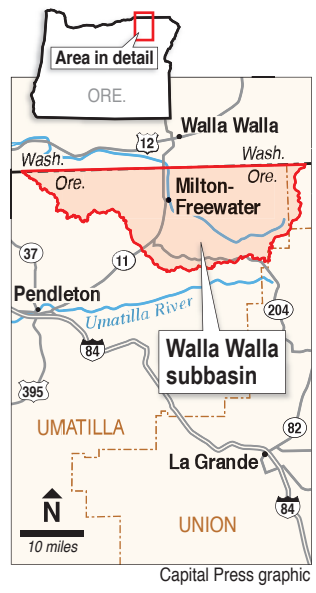
Years	Total precipitation (inches)
2012-14	44.5
1922-24	45.1
1918-20	46.1
1924-26	46.5
1929-31	46.7
1923-25	46.9
2007-09	48.2
1917-19	49.6
1975-77	49.8
1931-33	50.1

Source: Western Regional Climate Center

Capital Press graphic

Courtesy of UCANR

A drip irrigation system is installed in a field at the University of California's West Side Research and Extension Center in Parlier, Calif. Many UC trials are underway to test subsurface drip irrigation on different crops.



Capital Press graphic

New ag wells prohibited in Oregon's Walla Walla subbasin

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon's water regulators have unanimously voted to stop permitting new agricultural wells in Northeast Oregon's 300,000-acre Walla Walla subbasin due to groundwater depletion concerns.

At its May 11 meeting, the Oregon Water Resources Commission also designated the subbasin as a "serious water management problem area," which means irrigators with existing basalt wells must install flow meters to measure their water usage and report it to state regulators.

The restriction on new wells doesn't apply to exempt uses, such as domestic uses and livestock watering.

The decision was prompted by requests from senior water right holders in the region who complained of being unable to pump enough water, said Justin Iverson, groundwater section manager for the Oregon Water Resources Department, which is overseen by the commission.

"We do have a pretty wide distribution of water level declines across the full basin," Iverson said.

Groundwater levels have been dropping by up to four feet a year in the deeper basalt aquifer and up to one foot a year in the shallower alluvial aquifer, he said.

The commission's actions are intended to prevent the problem from growing worse and to improve OWRD's data about water usage in the region, Iverson said.

The next step will be finding ways to stabilize groundwater levels in the Walla Walla subbasin, with the department encouraging the local community to implement a voluntary, long-term water plan, he said.

Irrigators will have until the end of 2018 to install flow meters on their wells, which is a year longer than initially planned, he said.

The deadline was extended because local contractors likely wouldn't have enough time to install the equipment by the end of 2017, since they'd have to wait until the irrigation season ends in autumn, Iverson said.

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