

Oregon

Bulb onion growers seeing higher prices

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — Bulb onion growers in southwestern Idaho and Eastern Oregon are enjoying much higher prices than this time last year, the result of a production year that was well below average.

The price of a 50-pound bag of jumbo yellow onions has hovered between \$8.50 and \$10 in recent weeks, compared to about \$3.50 this time last year.

About 90 percent of the Spanish bulb onions grown in the region are yellows and most of those are jumbo size.

The onion market is extremely volatile but growers are riding a hot streak as far as prices go, said Cameron Skeen, an Oregon grower and chief operating officer for Baker & Murakami Produce Co., one of the largest onion shippers in the Idaho-Oregon growing region.

“Our market is historically higher than it’s been in



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Bulb onions are harvested in a field near Vale, Ore., in September. Onion growers in Idaho and Eastern Oregon are seeing prices well above last year’s levels for this time of the year.

awhile,” he said. “We’re having one of the best markets up to this point that we’ve had in

a long, long time.”
Onion growers in this region typically produce more

than 1 billion pounds of bulb onions a year but yields were off 25 to 30 percent this year

due to a late start to planting and unfavorable weather, Skeen said.

The current market “is a darn good price for this time of year (and) it’s a result of lower yields,” said Grant Kitamura, general manager of Baker & Murakami Produce.

Malheur County Onion Growers Association President Paul Skeen said jumbo prices have fallen slightly from a high of about \$10 per 50-pound bag to about \$9-9.50 recently, but he anticipates they will increase again soon.

“I think there’s going to be a movement in the market, up,” he said. “How much up I don’t know. The onion market (has) come down a little bit but we’re anticipating that it will go back up”

Some of the 300 onion growers and 30 shippers in the area were significantly impacted by last year’s harsh winter, which resulted in about 60 onion storage sheds

and packing facilities collapsing or sustaining major damage under the weight of snow and ice.

The event caused a lot of damage but the current uptick in prices is helping, Paul Skeen said.

“Onion prices are a lot better than they were last year,” he said. “We hope we can recoup some of the damage caused by Snowmageddon.”

The storage onions grown in this area are typically marketed through March and into April.

Cameron Skeen said that while it’s hard to predict what the onion market is going to do, he believes prices could increase some in January and should remain healthy through mid-March.

“It’s a manageable amount of inventory and I believe we’re going to continue to have a healthy market,” he said. “I’m bullish on the onion market.”

Irrigators protest Hood River water rights

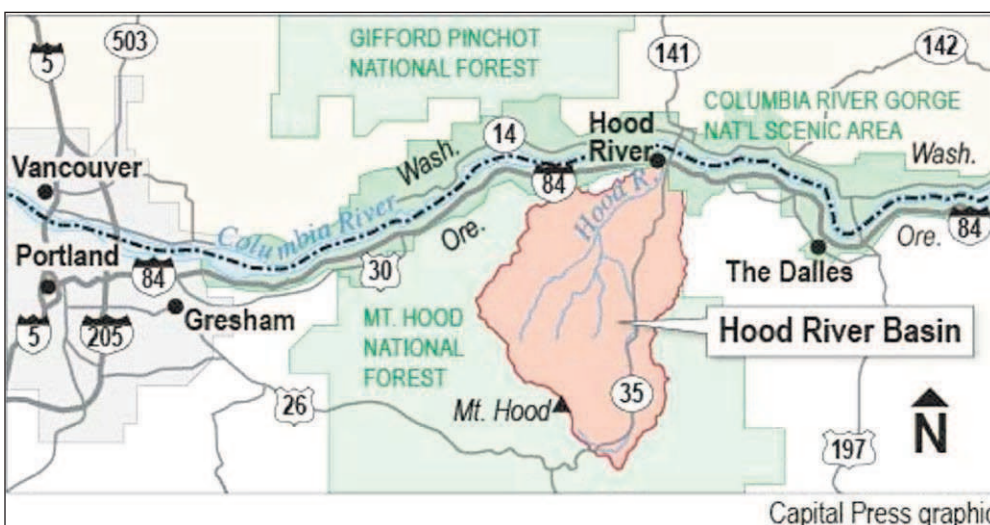
By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Several farm groups have filed protests against the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife’s proposal to obtain instream water rights in the Hood River Basin.

Fourteen of the agency’s applications for instream water rights, which are meant to protect flows, were met with objections from the Oregon Farm Bureau, Columbia Gorge Fruit Growers, local irrigation districts and county Farm Bureaus.

The Oregon Water Resources Department had proposed approving the applications, but the protesters argue the agency wrongly determined the instream water rights served the public interest.

Farmers are concerned that new ODFW-owned instream water rights could prevent the development of irrigation water rights under the Oregon Department of Agriculture’s



Capital Press graphic

83,000 acre-feet of “water reservations” in the basin, said Mary Anne Cooper, public policy counsel for Oregon Farm Bureau. When Oregon lawmakers passed a law to protect instream flows 30 years ago, they also allowed the Oregon Department of Agriculture to “reserve” water for economic development.

Last year, the Hood River Basin’s water reservations

were renewed for another two decades, as they generally haven’t yet been used to develop water rights.

However, such water reservations may play an important role in storing irrigation water if the Hood River Basin sees smaller snowpacks in the future.

Another concern is that instream water rights may impede the transfer or lease

of senior water rights, said Cooper.

New instream rights would be junior to those of existing water users, but Cooper said problems can arise when those irrigators want to move a point of diversion farther upstream.

In such a situation, ODFW may claim injury because the water remains instream for a shorter distance, she said.

Many basins need only part of average spring runoff

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

Because of high reservoir levels, many basins in Idaho and Eastern Oregon only need a portion of their average spring runoff in 2018 to ensure adequate water supplies for irrigators next year.

Ron Abramovich, a water supply specialist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, projected spring reservoir storage levels based on current conditions and how much water remained in reservoirs this fall.

He then used those projections to estimate how much stream flow, or runoff, is needed next year to ensure an adequate irrigation supply in certain basins in 2018.

As an example of how the calculations are made, annual irrigation demand in the Boise River basin is 1.5 million acre-feet. The basin’s reservoir system is projected to have 800,000 acre-feet of water by next spring.

That means 700,000 acre-feet of runoff in the form of stream flow is needed next spring, which amounts to 51 percent of the average stream flow in that basin.

For many basins, “It should be no sweat,” Abramovich said Dec. 14

during the Treasure Valley Irrigation Conference in Ontario, Ore. “Shortages are not expected at this time.”

The Owyhee River basin, which provides water to 118,000 acres of irrigated land in Eastern Oregon and part of Idaho, needs only 14 percent of average runoff next spring to ensure an adequate irrigation supply in 2018.

Based on the basin’s average runoff, that shouldn’t be much of a problem, said Oregon farmer Bruce Corn, a member of the Owyhee Irrigation District’s board of directors.

“Even with this (December) dry spell that we’re in, we’re close to having an adequate irrigation supply for next year,” he said. “It won’t take that much more to fill the reservoir.”

According to the NRCS projections, the Upper Snake River basin needs only 66 percent of its average stream flow next year.

The projections are a good way to distill the current water supply situation down to something everybody can understand, said Lyle Swank, watermaster for Water District 1 in East Idaho, which is the state’s largest and provides water for more than 1 million acres of irrigated farm land.

Oregon wrestles with pesticide spray zone regulations

New EPA rules to go into effect Jan. 2

By GEORGE PLAVERN
Capital Press

Oregon regulators are working to finalize a proposal that would protect farmworkers from drifting pesticides by allowing them to take shelter indoors.

The rule, developed by the Oregon Occupational Health and Safety Administration, or OSHA, seeks to address “application exclusion zones” introduced by the Environmental Protection Agency in its 2015 update of the Agricultural Worker Protection Standard.

Application exclusion zones require farms to evacuate workers within 100 feet of where trucks or planes are spraying pesticides, returning only after the equipment passes. The measure is intended to add another layer of protection against drift, which itself is illegal though it does sometimes occur.

Grower groups, however, argue the EPA did not account for worker housing on the farm when it came up with the exclusion zones, and called for a compliance alternative rather than having to rouse workers from their homes.

Michael Wood, Oregon OSHA administrator, said the issue is especially problematic for tree fruit growers in the Columbia River Gorge, where orchards may spray pesticides at 2 or 3 in the morning when the air is most calm.

“The growers came to us and said, you know, this is going to be something that’s a problem in our labor camps,” Wood said. “The challenge for us is to come up with an alternative that would protect the workers, but not be as disruptive to them and the growers.”

Statewide, Oregon has 309 labor camps registered under OSHA, including 1,262 buildings and 9,283 residents. Nearly two-thirds of those camps are in Wasco and Hood River counties.

For the last two years, Oregon OSHA has worked with growers and farmworker advocates to come up with a workable solution. The current proposal would allow workers to remain indoors while pesticides are sprayed, unless the chemicals pose a respiratory hazard. If the label requires use of a respirator, Oregon OSHA would enforce a 150-foot exclusion zone — stricter than what is required by the EPA — and would not allow workers to return home for 15 minutes.

“Obviously, the exposure potential is real,” Wood said.

Public comment on the rule was scheduled to end Dec. 15, but has been extended through the end of January. Wood said he expects a decision sometime in February.

The rule is being criticized on both ends of the spectrum of opinion, with some groups saying it does not do enough to protect workers and others saying it goes too far.

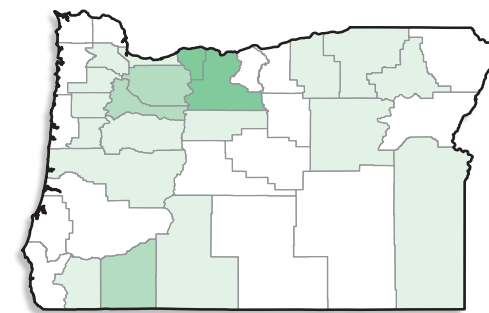
Mike Doke, executive director of the Columbia Gorge Fruit Growers, said remaining indoors is more safe for workers compared to moving everyone outside in the early morning hours. He said housing in the area is subject to high building standards, capable of withstanding harsh winters and plenty of rain.

Doke said the 150-foot exclusion zone, however, is not based on any scientific evidence, and may result in growers pulling trees, which will result in lost production and lost wages.

Oregon labor camps registered in 2017

Nearly two-thirds of the 309 OSHA registered labor camps statewide are in Wasco and Hood River counties. They contain 1,262 buildings that house 9,283 residents.

1-10 camps 11-50 camps More than 50



Source: Oregon OSHA


- County
- Benton
- Clackamas
- Grant
- Hood River
- Jackson
- Jefferson
- Josephine
- Klamath
- Lane
- Linn
- Malheur
- Marion
- Morrow
- Multnomah
- Polk
- Umatilla
- Union
- Wasco
- Washington
- Yamhill



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