

Oregon water year off to slow start

Temperatures up, precipitation down in November

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Capital Press

Just two months into the new water year, Oregon is already lagging behind in precipitation and snowpack across much of the state, deepening concerns about another difficult drought year in 2019.

The Oregon Water Resources Department released its latest water conditions report Dec. 3, showing average temperatures for the month of November were 2 to 5 degrees above normal in most of western and northeast Oregon.

Precipitation was also well below normal statewide, as much as 1 to 3 inches in parts of northeast and northwest Oregon.

Racquel Rancier, senior policy coordinator for the OWRD, said it is still too early to make predictions about water conditions next year, though soil moisture, stream flows and mountain snowpack are all lower than usual out of the starting gate.

"If temperatures continue to be warmer than normal and we don't get a good snowpack, and if precipitation is low, we could be heading into a difficult drought year for 2019," Rancier said.

Long-term forecasts are not calling for much relief. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Prediction Center calculates the odds of El Niño at more than 80 percent through February, which typically means mild winter weather in store for the Pacific Northwest.

"This is concerning, as this could result in less precipitation fall as snow," Rancier said. "If the forecast is correct, we could see a continuation of drought conditions."

Snowpack is critical for farmers, ranchers and fisheries in the West, because it acts as a natural reservoir for water to gradually replenish streams and reservoirs into summer. So far, water basins in southern Oregon, including the Klamath, Harney, Owyhee, Malheur and Lake County basins, are all experiencing average- to above-average

snow. The situation is more dire farther north, with the Willamette Basin currently at 51 percent of normal, and the Hood, Sandy and Lower Deschutes basins at 35 percent.

Average stream flows were about 50 percent of normal in November, including 30 percent of normal west of the Cascades. Rancier said many reservoirs also have little to no carryover water for next year, making precipitation all the more critical for irrigation supplies.

"This could make drought more challenging in 2019, as water in reservoirs in 2018 helped reduce drought impacts in 2018," she said.

Oregon remains mired in a statewide drought, with the U.S. Drought Monitor

reporting more than half the state in "severe drought," and 34 percent in "extreme drought." Last summer, OWRD interviewed 11 district watermasters, six Oregon State University extension agents, one irrigation district, four river outfitters, four municipalities and tribal staff to gain a picture of drought impacts, from wildfires to shortened growing seasons and lost economic development.

The Farmers Irrigation District in Hood River, Ore., reported rapid snowmelt in May, which led to voluntary curtailment of water for municipal use while tightly managing the lease of water from its reservoir. Less water also meant less hydroelectric production in the district, affecting how much revenue the district receives

from selling hydroelectricity to PacifiCorp.

The district watermaster in Grants Pass, Ore., began curtailing water on July 12, compared to August or September during an average year. Curtailments also started a month or two early on the John Day River in Eastern Oregon.

"Regardless of the current conditions, we have experienced drought across many parts of the state in recent years, and we continue to be concerned that this is becoming the new normal," Rancier said. "Therefore, regardless of what the conditions will be next year, it really is advisable that water users take steps to ensure that they plan for increased incidences of drought and take steps to reduce vulnerability to drought."

Marijuana pesticide contamination worries Oregon farmers

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

Concerns about pesticide drift are nothing new in agriculture, but the issue has taken on new gravity for Oregon farmers with marijuana-growing neighbors.

Due to Oregon's pesticide testing regime for marijuana and its high value, growers of more conventional crops worry about getting blamed for contamination that renders the mind-altering flowers unsalable.

"I have neighbors growing marijuana, therefore I'm thinking about it," said Tim Winn, who farms in Benton County.

The potential problem was recently discussed during the Oregon Farm Bureau's annual convention, held Dec. 4-6 in Salem, Ore.

County representatives of the organization voted to request that its board of directors consider possible solutions with the Oregon Department of Agriculture, which is one of several state agencies involved in regulating the recreational marijuana since voters legalized it in 2014.

Marijuana remains illegal under federal law, so there are no pesticides specifically registered for use on the psychoactive crop.

Oregon does permit marijuana growers to use certain general biopesticides that aren't subject to federal residue regulations, but detection of conventional pesticides disqualifies the crop from the commercial market.

"It's a human consumptive crop so they're very strict about any impurities," said Winn.

Neighboring marijuana growers have approached Winn when looking for the source of contamination after their product tested positive for prohibited pesticides, he said.

While Winn replied that he follows all pesticide label regulations, he said it's still possible that such chemicals can be transferred by dust storms and insects.

Another concern is that marijuana growers can submit claims to a farmer's liability insurance alleging pesticide drift, which could have serious implications given marijuana's high value, he said.

While an insurance company may not think much of paying out a claim for a few rows of organic sweet corn that's been contaminated, an acre of contaminated marijuana would be a much bigger financial hit, Winn said.

As a result, the insur-



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press
Marijuana plants grow in a high tunnel at a farm near McMinnville, Ore. Oregon farmers are concerned about pesticide drift allegations from marijuana-growing neighbors due to the crop's high value and zero regulatory tolerance for pesticides.

ance company may stop insuring similar drift claims in the future or even cancel the farmer's policy, he said. "You need to be risk averse, so you don't use that insurance."

It might make sense for marijuana to only be grown along the edges of "exclusive farm use" zones, as opposed to being surrounded by conventional agriculture on all sides, he said.

However, some growers are concerned about the "right to farm" implications of such proposals.

Tracey Liskey, a Klamath Falls farmer, urged Farm Bureau county delegates to vote against the resolution to discuss the issue with ODA.

"Do we want the state telling us what we can grow and what we can't?" he said.

Other attempts to resolve coexistence problems through regulation — such as canola restrictions in the Willamette Valley and the prohibition on genetically engineered crops in Jackson County — have turned farmer against farmer, Liskey said.

It's much better for neighboring growers to work

out problems among themselves, such as agreeing to plant buffer crops between their fields, he said.

Exactly how the ODA could help resolve the issue remains to be determined, but the resolution doesn't change Oregon Farm Bureau's policy of coexistence among crops, said Mary Anne Cooper, public policy counsel for the organization.

The Farm Bureau's board of directors will consider the resolution at its meeting in February and then decide whether to take any action, she said.

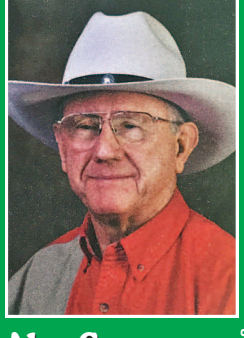
Under current law, ODA doesn't have the authority to establish a control district — which would be necessary to regulate where marijuana is grown — unless it's due to pest and disease risks associated with a crop, said Scott Dahlman, policy director for the Oregonians for Food & Shelter agribusiness group.

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Item/description (Source: USDA, NASS; NOAA)	Ore.	Wash.	Idaho	Calif.
• Snow water equivalent*	74.3%	83.1%	83.8%	79%
• Percent area in drought	75.8%	79.6%	60.4%	92.2%
• Avg. temperature, 6-10 day outlook (Percent chance deviation from normal)	70-80% above	70-80% above	70-80% above	70-80% above
• Precipitation, 6-10 day outlook (Percent chance deviation from normal)	40-60% above	60% above	40-60% above	33-50% above/ Normal (south)
• Soil moisture anomaly (Monthly deviation from normal)	Below normal	Below normal	Normal/ Below normal	Normal/ Below normal

*Aggregate average percent of median as of Feb. 20. Medians calculated for the period from 1981-2010. Sources: USDA, NRCS; NOAA, www.ca.gov; www.drought.gov/

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