

Warm, dry winter predicted for Northwest

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

Odds are high that the Pacific Northwest will be warmer than average the next three months, and current drought conditions are expected to persist, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration scientists said Dec. 20.

Temperatures in Oregon, Washington and Northern California have been generally above average recently. That trend is expected to continue in January, February and March as an El Niño forms, according to NOAA.

“Western snowpack is generally behind average, particularly the farther west you go,” NOAA climate scientist Deke Arndt said. “The Cascades have quite a bit less snow on them than is typical.”

NOAA updated its seasonal outlook for U.S. temperatures and precipitation. More than anywhere else in the Lower 48, the odds favor above-normal temperatures in Western Oregon and Western Washington, according to NOAA. Odds in the rest of the West also lean toward higher-than-usual temperatures.

The odds favor a drier-than-average winter in Oregon, Washington, Northern California and the Idaho Panhandle, with the rest of the West having equal chances of wet, dry or average precipitation.

Nearly 90 percent of Oregon and nearly 33 percent of Washington were in some stage of drought, the U.S. Drought Monitor reported Dec. 20.

“Persistence (of drought conditions) is forecast for the Pacific Northwest,” NOAA meteorologist Brad Pugh said. “That’s related to the low snowpack currently over the Cascades and also the seasonal outlook for drier than normal conditions.”

In Oregon and Washington, snowpacks in the Cascades ranged Dec. 20 from 95 percent of normal near the Canadian border to 39 percent in northern Oregon, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Pugh said an El Niño has yet to influence the weather. Sea-surface temperatures have been above average for several weeks, but the warm ocean has yet to link up with the atmosphere to form an El Niño. “We haven’t seen that atmospheric response to the warmer than normal sea-surface temperatures,” he said.

Climatologists pegged the chances that a weak to moderate El Niño will form in the next month at 90 percent. An El Niño typically will have its greatest effect on Northwest winters after Jan. 1.

El Niño’s warm waters are along the equator. According to the Office of the Washington State Climatologist, sea-surface temperatures in the Gulf of Alaska also are higher than average and resemble the mass of warm winter that contributed to the 2015 drought. Pugh said those warm waters did not factor into his forecast.

U.S. hop production hits new high

By **DAN WHEAT**
Capital Press

MOXEE, Wash. — U.S. hop production reached a record high of 107 million pounds in 2018, according to the USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service.

But production grew just 1 percent in 2018 versus 20 percent in 2017, a NASS report says. The U.S. produced 106 million pounds of hops in 2017 and 87 million in 2016.

There was a 3,000-acre increase in 2017 and a big jump in yields after 2016 had been impacted by weather and a lot of baby hops at negligible production, said Ann George, administrator of the Hop Growers of America and the Washington Hop Commission, both in Moxee.

The national organization holds its annual meeting in Monterey, Calif., Jan. 22-25.

Hop supply, mostly used for making beer, has increased for several years because of tremendous growth in craft beer production. But the annual rate of craft beer growth has slowed from 20 percent to 5 percent, resulting in less demand for some



A wagon load of hops enters the warehouse during harvest last September at Wenas Hop Co., Selah, Wash. The state grew 73 percent of the nation’s hops in 2018. Idaho and Oregon grew the rest.

aroma hop varieties, George said. In September, hop stocks were up for the third September in a row following being up for the third March in a row.

Pete Mahony, vice president of supply chain and purchasing for John I. Haas, Inc., Yakima, said consumption appeared to be keeping pace with supply, a positive sign.

The industry hopes that’s the case preventing oversupply and a big downturn in prices but there are a lot of variables, George said.

“We have over 60 hop varieties in the U.S. and over 100 in the world and each one has a micro market. So it’s difficult for the merchant sector to maintain adequate inventories of all the different varieties,” she said.

Judge OKs class-action suit against Wash. farm

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

All 600 Mexican nationals who picked blueberries in 2017 for a Washington farm can be represented in a lawsuit alleging workers were mistreated, a federal judge ruled Dec. 20.

District Judge John Coughenour ruled that claims by two aggrieved workers raised issues that applied to all seasonal foreign workers at Sarbanand Farms in Whatcom County.

Columbia Legal Services attorney Joe Morrison said Dec. 21 he had been confident the judge would approve turning the two-plaintiff case into a class-action lawsuit.

If the judge had not, “it would have changed the case dramatically,” Morrison said. “Every worker would have had to file an individual lawsuit, which is completely unrealistic for this group of folks.”

The ruling potentially raises the financial stakes in a dispute that stems from the Aug. 6, 2017, death of a



Striking farmworkers show their visas after being fired by Sarbanand Farms in Whatcom County, Wash., two years ago. A judge has now certified a lawsuit class-action lawsuit against the farm.

farmworker from Mexico. The 28-year-old man died of natural causes at a Seattle hospital, according to officials, and a state investigation cleared Sarbanand managers of any role in his death.

His hospitalization, however, led to approximately 60 other workers from Mexico staging a one-day walk-out. The farm fired them the next day and ordered them

to leave worker housing. The lawsuit filed by Columbia Legal Services and a Seattle law firm on behalf of two of the fired workers, Barbaro Rosas and Guadalupe Tapia, does not blame farm managers for the worker’s death. The suit claims striking workers were wrongly fired and evicted, and all workers were browbeaten into picking

harvest unrealistic amounts of berries per hour.

Sarbanand is owned by Baldev and Kable Munger, owners of the large California berry company Munger Brothers. The suit names Sarbanand, Munger and two other defendants, Munger employee Nidia Perez and Mexican company CSI Visa Processing, which recruited H-2A workers from Mexico. Each worker could rep-

resent multiple violations of the Washington Farm Labor Contractors Act. State law allows a fine of up to \$1,000 for each violation.

Sarbanand says the H-2A workers were fired and sent home for insubordination and denies workers were threatened or ill-fed.

“It (the ruling) was disappointing and, of course, we’re pushing forward,” said Sarbanand general counsel Tom Pedreira, who is not litigating the suit. “The court’s order was not (a) finding that Sarbanand or any of the other defendants did anything wrong.”

The walkout, firings and worker’s death drew media, activist and government attention to the farm in Sumas near the Canadian farm. The Washington Department of Labor and Industries levied a record \$149,800 fine for missed rest breaks and late meals at the farm. A judge later cut the fine in half. Other investigations failed to confirm complaints that workers had been exposed to pesticides or poorly fed.

Oregon ranchers upset by wild horse release

Forest Service says horses were returned to area of origin

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

An apparent relocation of wild horses to Oregon’s Malheur National Forest has upset ranchers who say the area is already overstocked with the animals.

Rancher Mike Moore said he encountered a Forest Service vehicle pulling a trailer on Dec. 14 in the Murderers Creek allotment of the national forest, which is an unusual sight, especially during winter.

Responding to questions, the “sheepish” Forest Service employee driving the vehicle admitted the trailer contained several wild horses gathered from the neighboring Ochoco National Forest that were to be released in the area, Moore said.

“I just think this is wrong.

You can’t be taking horses from one forest to another, that isn’t right,” he said. “We’ve got too many horses and they’re not helping by bringing more horses from another forest to this forest.”

Representatives of the Malheur National Forest said they’re coordinating with the Ochoco National Forest to understand why some horses were returned to the Murderers Creek allotment from the neighboring national forest and would soon issue a statement about the situation.

Wild horses are a contentious subject in the Malheur National Forest, where ranchers say the animals trample stream banks to the detriment of federally-protected fish, preventing cattle from being allowed to graze on affected allotments.

The maximum “appropriate management level” for the Murderers Creek herd management area is 140 wild horses, whereas the most recent estimate for the actual population is 339 horses.

Loren Stout, a rancher who grazes cattle on the Murderers Creek allotment, said the actual population is probably more than 500 horses.

Stout said he’s doubtful of the Forest Service’s explanation of the incident, which he believes is illegal and in violation of a 2013 settlement agreement in which the agency agreed to reduce the wild horse population in the area.

“Why they did it, I have no idea,” Stout said. “It’s unbelievable, especially after going through a

lawsuit.” Moore said he’s likewise skeptical of the explanation that the horses were being returned after venturing off the Malheur National Forest.

“There’s a lot going on here that doesn’t make a lot of sense,” he said. “I think

they’re in damage control right now.”

After Stout filed a lawsuit alleging the Forest Service had violated the Endangered Species Act, a federal judge agreed that the agency had failed to consult about the impacts of wild horses on threatened steelhead.



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Weekly Fieldwork Report

	Ore.	Wash.	Idaho	Calif.
Item/description (Source: USDA, NASS; NOAA)				
• Snow water equivalent*	81.8%	95.3%	84.4%	72.8%
• Percent area in drought	100%	79.6%	65.7%	92.2%
• Avg. temperature, 6-10 day outlook (Percent chance deviation from normal)	40-60% below	40-50% below	40-70% below	40-70% below
• Precipitation, 6-10 day outlook (Percent chance deviation from normal)	40-50% below	Normal	40-50% below	33-60% below
• Soil moisture anomaly (Monthly deviation from normal)	Below normal	Normal/ Below normal	Normal	Below normal

*Aggregate average percent of median as of Dec. 24. Medians calculated for the period from 1981-2010. Sources: USDA, NRCS; NOAA, www.ca.gov; www.drought.gov/

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