

January storms boost Idaho water supply

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

Above-normal precipitation in January boosted water supplies for the irrigation season in much of Idaho, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service reports.

January precipitation in many basins was 25% to 75% above normal, following a below-average December and record-dry November, NRCS said in its Idaho Water Supply Outlook Report for Feb. 1.

Snowpack in most basins is within 10% of normal in



Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press File

The Snake River runs downriver from Shoshone Falls at Twin Falls, Idaho.

much of the state. But many storms have been coming from the west-northwest,

leaving less snowfall in the Wood River and Lost River basins in the state's east-cen-

tral mountains. Snowpacks range from 65% to 80% of normal in those basins.

Danny Tappa, with NRCS Idaho Snow Survey in Boise, said the Wood and Lost River Basin snowpacks typically peak sometime in April. The last two years saw these basins' snowpacks exceed normal by the peak after recording below-average levels at the start of February.

Above-normal amounts of water left in many reservoirs after last irrigation season — carryover storage — implies less runoff is needed to ensure adequate supplies for irrigation and other uses

this year. NRCS said reservoir storage in the Upper and Middle Snake River basins on Feb. 1 was 144% and 131% of normal, respectively. Median streamflow forecasts range from about 85% to 105% of normal.

Southside Snake basins also had above-average reservoir storage, including Owyhee at 147% and Salmon Falls at 189%.

The Boise River Basin on Feb. 1 had reservoir storage of 117% of normal, while storage in the Payette system was around normal. NRCS expects runoff in both regions to range from 70% to

105% of normal.

The Owyhee, Salmon Falls and Snake basins are among those where NRCS currently expects water availability above the long-term median based on its Surface Water Supply Index. The index combines streamflow forecasts and reservoir storage. Boise and Weiser basins are approaching the median.

Current near-term outlooks from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration show increased likelihood of above-normal precipitation in February.

United Grain Corp. purchases Treasure Valley facilities

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — United Grain Corp. is expanding its holdings into the Treasure Valley with the purchase of two grain storage and shipping facilities in Ontario, Ore., and Notus, Idaho.

The Vancouver, Wash.-based exporter announced the deal on Feb. 2.

Jason Middleton, region manager of United Grain, said the properties will add more than 1.6 million bushels of capacity for wheat and corn. They were bought from Scoular, a grain handling company headquartered in Omaha, Neb. Terms were not immediately available.

"They're great facilities," Middleton said. "It fits well into our program."

United Grain operates an export terminal in Vancouver with a capacity of 8 million bushels — the largest on the West Coast.

Another part of United Grain's business model is owning "origination assets" including grain bins, piles and upcountry elevators



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United Grain Corp. has purchased facilities in Ontario, Ore., and Notus, Idaho.

where farmers deliver their grain after harvest. Middleton said that gives them a handle on the entire supply chain, increasing speed, space and service to the grower.

United Grain now owns 15 upcountry locations in five states — Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana and North Dakota. Perhaps its biggest splash came in 2016 when the company purchased nearly all grain assets from Pendleton Grain Growers in Eastern Oregon, an 86-year-old farmers' co-op that voted to dissolve after suffering major financial losses.

Wheat from the Treasure Valley has already been sent to the Columbia River for years, Middleton added, making the Ontario and Notus facilities a natural fit. "Moving wheat is like moving water. Grain wants to move in the path of least resistance."

United Grain says it will immediately have bids at the facilities for soft white, hard red winter, club and spring wheat. The company will also continue to partner with Scoular on its corn program for the next year to ensure a seamless transition.

Lower Owyhee River flow boost comes early

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

Irrigation managers have raised flows from the Owyhee Reservoir to midseason levels two months earlier than usual.

The reasons, Owyhee Irrigation District Manager Jay Chamberlin said, include an above-average snowpack, limited room to store more water behind the dam and the as yet-unknown impacts of expected runoff.

"We're trying to slow things down so we don't impact farm ground along the Lower Owyhee River later in the spring," Chamberlin said. "If we can release it now and leave a cushion in the reservoir, when we get spring runoff, we can take the top off and have more available space to have those bigger (reservoir-in-flow) runs. That would help minimize what we would have to release down the river."

Nyssa, Ore.-based OID increased river flows from the typical winter level of about 30 cubic feet per second to 253 cfs, usually not seen until irrigation season ramps up each spring. The boost occurred over about a week, with incremental stops at about 60 and 125 cfs, to accommodate fisheries and recreation.

"Based upon current reservoir storage and forecast snowpack runoff, the decision was made to go ahead and start the Owyhee Dam power plant to kind of slow down storage" from reservoir inflows, Chamberlin said. "The inflow picked up considerably. We've got to

leave some space available for spring runoff. We are trying to slow things down."

The reservoir on Feb. 10 was 73% full and the snow-water equivalent in the Owyhee River Basin was around 118% of the long-term median, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service reported, respectively.



Owyhee Irrigation District
Owyhee Irrigation District Manager Jay Chamberlin.

Many of Bruce Cruickshank's farm properties are irrigated by Owyhee Reservoir, which he said had above-average carryover storage following the 2019 irrigation season. The reservoir can hold up to a two-year supply of irrigation water.

"I think there's enough water in there right now to get us through at least this next year, even if we didn't get any more water," he said.

Chamberlin said the timing and extent of any future increases in river flow will depend on spring runoff. "The (flow) amount could come up, and probably will."

He said runoff can be tough to forecast in the 11,000-square-mile basin that includes parts of Idaho and Nevada. He flew over parts of the basin Feb. 10.

"If we don't get a wet spring, we'll manage it well," Chamberlin said. "If we get rain on snow like some other areas, that gets a little dicey because we only need about 200,000 acre-feet of runoff to fill (Owyhee Reservoir) and they are predicting 500,000" for February through June.

Irrigation supplies are adequate already, he said.

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