



Courtesy U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

**Arrowrock Dam is one of three dams on the Boise River system.**

## Boise River irrigation supply looking good, watermaster says

By **BRAD CARLSON**  
Capital Press

Boise River Watermaster Rex Barrie is mostly optimistic about this season's irrigation water supply.

"We should have adequate supply for the 2021 irrigation season for the Treasure Valley," he said. "That being said, with the reservoirs, it's still too early to tell if we're going to completely fill the system or not. I'm fairly optimistic we'll get Lucky Peak filled."

In April's first half water managers will raise Boise River flows to supply irrigation and other uses. Lucky Peak is the farthest downstream of the river's three reservoirs. The others are Arrowrock and Anderson Ranch.

Filling reservoirs benefits current usage while carrying over water for the following year. Barrie said carry-over was decent following the 2019-20 winter and 2020 irrigation season.

Arrowrock Reservoir filled March 28.

Barrie said he is not sure if or when Anderson Ranch

Reservoir, on the South Fork Boise, will fill.

"It's the largest reservoir, in the smallest portion of the basin," he said of Anderson Ranch. "And we were a little behind on snowpack in the South Fork drainage this past season."

Snow-water equivalent in the Boise River Basin stood at 83% of the 30-year median as of April 5, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service reported.

Barrie said the reservoirs' ultimate levels will depend in part on weather.

"If we get a rain-on-snow event, things start happening quickly," he said. But alternating bursts of hot and cold temperatures can delay snow's travel down mountains and direct runoff into soil before it makes it into reservoirs.

Ryan Hedrick, water-operations lead with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation Middle Snake Field Office in Boise, said that when Boise River flows reach full summer levels will depend on flood-risk management and demand from irrigators.

## Nevada farmers and conservationists balk at 'water banking'

By **SAM METZ**  
The Associated Press

CARSON CITY, Nev. — Rural water users are panicking over a proposal to create a market for the sale and purchase of water rights in Nevada, unconvinced by arguments that the concept would encourage conservation.

Lawmakers on Monday weighed whether so-called "water banking" would be preferable to prevailing water law doctrines that govern surface and groundwater rights disputes in the driest state in the U.S.

A legislative hearing about two proposals to allow water rights holders to sell their entitlements pitted state water bureaucrats against a coalition of farmers, conservationists and rural officials.

One proposal would allow for basins to create "banks" where surface and groundwater rights holders can sell or lease water they conserve. The other would create programs to manage the conserved water, allowing the state to purchase "conservation credits" or pay water rights holders to "retire" their claims.

"What we've heard all the time for years is that this is incentivizing people to use more water that they need; or they are being punished for not using their entire water right; or they're forced to sell off what they don't use. There's no really satisfying response to that except that it's how (the law) was written," acting Nevada State Engineer Adam Sullivan said.

As the U.S. West contends with a hotter and drier future, water banking is becoming an increasingly prevalent management strategy in states including Colorado and Utah. Proponents argue crediting people for conservation will help prevent future shortages and offer water rights holders an option beyond use, abandonment or selling.

A working group in the Colorado Legislature is evaluating the concept and the proposals under consideration in Nevada are based off policies in place in Utah and Oregon. The state's proposals were among the most anticipated bills in the Nevada Legislature this year. In his presentation to lawmakers, even Sullivan said he was skeptical about creating an account to allow the state to purchase conservation credits and told lawmakers "it should only move forward with great caution."

"Criticism that we've heard about creating an account like this are that it could accelerate the cost of water rights, creating more problems than it solves," he said.

In rural Nevada, where limited groundwater has long sustained industries like ranching and mining, local officials worry that creating a market for water rights will encourage their constituents to lease their water for use elsewhere. They also worry water banking facilitates speculation from investors betting that water will become more valuable as perennial drought makes it more scarce.

"I think there needs to be more work before you open that Pandora's box, because when you open it, you can't shut it," Edwin James, general manager of the Carson Water Subconservancy District, said of the idea to start buying water in order to conserve it for the future. "You have to really be careful before you start buying water rights that are not being used."

Throughout the West, rural water users have been pursued by New York-based hedge fund Water Asset Management, which has reportedly purchased water rights from farmers in central Nevada's Humboldt River basin, in Colorado's Grand Valley and in central Arizona.

# Environmental Working Group: Conservation programs need reform

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**  
Capital Press

A new administration brings opportunities to align conservation practices with the administration's focus on climate change, according to an environmental activism group.

"Many of the practices that help reduce farm pollution and protect our drinking water supplies are the same practices that sequester carbon in the soil or reduce emission of nitrous oxide," said Scott Faber, senior vice president of government affairs for the Environmental Working Group.

"So I think there are big opportunities as Secretary (Tom) Vilsack has talked about for farmers to help



**Scott Faber**

address the climate crisis," he said during the latest "Dairy Download" podcast.

But reforms to conservation programs are needed. Some of the rewards for good stewardship aren't being provided in ways that ultimately get the biggest bang for the buck, he said.

"Right now, we provide about \$5 billion a year in payments through the Natural Resources Conservation Service and to some extent through the Farm Service Agency — and that's terrific," he said.

The Environmental

Working Group has fought through successive farm bills to increase funding for conservation programs, but they need improvements, he said.

"Too much of those funds are going to practices that don't provide much benefit for the environment or even, in some cases, harm the environment," he said.

"We need to do a much better job of reforming those conservation programs ... to really focus on the practices that we know from USDA's own research do the most to reduce the loss of nitrogen from farms, do the most to reduce the loss of soil from farms, help farmers reduce methane emissions, help farmers sequester carbon in the soil," he said.

As for the dairy industry in particular, there's a lot of room for improvement as to how feed is produced, he said.

"We lose a lot of nitrogen, we use nitrogen really inefficiently. That has real-world impacts for drinking water pollution. It has real-world impacts for the amount of nitrous oxide that's going up into the atmosphere," he said.

There are lots of things dairy farmers and dairy processors can do to demand more from their supply chains, especially how feed is produced. They can also invest in technology for feed additives to reduce methane emissions, and they can store more carbon in the soil, he said.

## Experts predict strong 2021 market for meat, poultry

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**  
Capital Press

Economists and protein experts at the 2021 Annual Meat Conference Monday predicted mostly positive developments for the meat industry this year.

Experts predict strong consumer demand and expanded trade opportunities, contrasted with shrinking production — "a recipe for higher meat prices."

Retail demand is expected to soften as restaurants reopen, but economists say the hot economy for proteins is likely to remain healthy.

### Chicken

Paul Aho, economist and consultant at Poultry Perspective, said that because of high grain prices, he predicts more growth in poultry demand compared to pork and beef this year.

Aho said 2021 "started off with a bang" with strong demand for deboned chicken breasts.

Wing prices are also high, a trend Aho predicts will continue through 2021.

"Americans love their wings," he said.

As demand increases, production growth is slowing. The U.S. is expected to produce only 1 billion additional



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pounds of red meat and poultry 2020 to 2022, compared to 3.2 billion additional pounds 2018 to 2020.

Less meat coupled with strong demand, Aho said, should mean higher prices for producers.

On international trade, Aho said China is purchasing record volumes of chicken right now in the wake of African swine fever. Although Chinese consumers prefer pork, many are turning to chicken during the protein shortage.

"But this is all dependent on if the relationship remains cordial with China," said Aho.

There's also growing chicken demand in the Middle East, Aho said.

### Pork

Although pork producers faced a tough 2020, Steve Meyer, economist at Partners for Production Agriculture, said by the end of the year, pork demand was

strong.

Sow prices are near record high this month, he said, "a sign of great demand for sausage and processed meats."

As restaurants reopen, Meyer predicts shoppers will gradually buy smaller pork volumes. For example, a consumer might buy a burger at a restaurant with just a few slices of bacon on it compared to a whole pound of bacon in a grocery store.

Even so, Meyer expects many people who picked up cooking during COVID-19 will continue.

On the international market, Meyer said pork exports are at a record high. The U.S. exported 15.2% more pork in 2020 than in 2019, and demand continues to grow.

### Beef

Despite restaurant closures, Randy Blach, CEO of CattleFax, said the beef industry during 2020 saw its highest demand in 30 years.

As the world pulls out of the pandemic, Blach predicts 2021 will be the second-highest year on record for beef demand.

Domestic per capita meat consumption is then expected to decline 4% to 5% over the next few years, but Blach predicts exports will pick up significantly.

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