

Lower USDA wheat projections reflect lack of rain

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

USDA is projecting lower winter wheat production and yields this year compared to 2020's bumper crops across the Pacific Northwest.

The region's wheat commission executives say that's to be expected, given the lack of rain this spring.

"Certainly with less moisture so far this year, we would expect yields to be down



Glen Squires

in Washington," said Glen Squires, CEO of the Washington Grain Commission. "(We're) hoping that some timely rains will occur this month and into June to help the crop along."

Idaho farmers are in much the same position.

"Idaho had record yields last year for winter wheat and we did not expect to match those yields for a second year, so it is not surprising that the production estimates are lower," said Casey Chumrau, executive director of the Idaho Wheat Commission. "Considering the dry con-



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press File

Northwest winter wheat production and yields are projected to be lower this year, according to the USDA.

ditions around the state, we would be happy with only a 3 percent decrease as predicted in this report."

Idaho farmers planted slightly more winter and spring wheat acreage, Chumrau said.

"If prices remain high, we may see an increase in planted acres in the fall. Wheat becomes a lot more attractive at \$8 (per bushel)," she said. "But input costs are also going up so growers will need to lock in those costs and pencil it out."

Drought in much of Oregon will have a "significant" impact on expected average yields.

"Without changes in weather, I would expect to see it down even further,"



Casey Chumrau



Amanda Hoey

Oregon Wheat CEO Amanda Hoey said.

Washington acreage may be slightly down from last year, but 2020 was the highest acreage since 2006, Squires said. The Northwest's overall wheat acreage is unchanged from last year, he said.

The USDA projects:
• Washington farmers will harvest 1.69 million acres, down 3.4% from 2020. Production will be 108 million

bushels, down 19% from 2020.

• Oregon farmers are projected to harvest 705,000 acres of winter wheat, down 2.8% from 2020. Production is pegged at 39.5 million bushels, down 15% from 2020.

• Idaho farmers are expected to harvest 680,000 acres, up 3% from 2020. Production is expected to be 64.6 million bushels, down 3% from 2020.

Yields are also expected to be down. Washington's average yield is expected to be 64 bushels per acre, down from 72 bushels per acre in 2020.

Oregon's average yield of 56 bushels per acre would be down from 64 bushels in 2020.

Idaho's yield is expected to average 95 bushels per acre, down from 101 bushels per acre last year.

Nationwide, production is expected to be 1.28 billion bushels, up 10% from 1.17 billion bushels in 2020.

The yield was forecast at 52.1 bushels per acre, up 1.2 bushels from last year. Growers planted an estimated 33.1 million acres in the fall of 2020.

Figures are based on May 1 conditions, according to USDA.

Farm groups ask Inslee to repeal housing rules

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Two farm groups petitioned Gov. Jay Inslee on May 14 to immediately lift emergency COVID restrictions on housing seasonal farmworkers, arguing the rules are out of step with new federal advice on masks and social distancing for the fully vaccinated.

The governor has seven days — through May 21 — to repeal the rules or explain to the Washington Farm Bureau and Wafila why he won't.

The groups say the rules are unnecessary, especially after Inslee said Thursday that businesses will fully reopen June 30.

Inslee's announcement trailed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's new position that immunized people can safely interact indoors or outdoors without masks or socially distancing.

Washington's farmworker housing rules call for masks, social distancing and isolating workers, even if fully vaccinated. The rules will be in effect until Sept. 6 unless the Inslee administration changes course.

Wafila CEO Dan Fazio said vaccination rates among farmworkers exceed those of the public, making farmworker housing safer than other settings cited by the CDC.

"We are 90% vaccinated with a goal of 100%, and we have these ridiculous regulations in place," he said. "There is no emergency once you have 90% of the people vaccinated. That's what the CDC is trying to say."

The governor's office declined to comment, saying it was waiting to hear from the Department of Labor and Industries. An L&I spokesman Thursday said the agency was review-

ing the rules.

The Farm Bureau and Wafila, a guestworker supplier, have been pressing L&I and the Department of Health for months to loosen the rules, or plan ahead for when farmworkers are vaccinated.

The rules, a year old, reduced housing capacity, imposing hardships on farmers and forcing more workers to live in the community, where they are more likely to contract COVID, according to the farm groups.

Farm Bureau CEO John Stuhlmiller said he hasn't seen a sign from the administration that the rules will change.

"We need these economically crippling restrictions lifted like the governor is doing for the rest of the state," he said. "All the facts point to having them go away now."

The Farm Bureau and Wafila challenged the rules in a lawsuit filed in February in Yakima County. The groups won a few concessions. The state, however, was granted a change of venue to Thurston County, stalling the suit's progress. The case is not currently before a judge.

The farm groups continue to ask for the science behind limiting bunk beds to shelters with no more than 15 workers. The workers must be isolated in "pods."

Vaccinated pods can mingle on buses and kitchens with other vaccinated pods, providing workers wear masks and social distancing. The CDC says masks and social distancing are not needed, the farm groups note.

The farm groups also complain the rules let union and legal aid representatives visit farmworker housing, even if they're not vaccinated.

State law allows groups to petition the governor to repeal emergency rules.

La Nina gone, but may return again for next winter

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

A La Nina that brought a healthy snowpack to Washington has ended, but may return later this year for another winter, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said Thursday.

NOAA's Climate Prediction Center reported that Pacific Ocean temperatures have warmed to normal and likely will stay that way through the summer.

The warming broke a link between the sea and atmo-

sphere that had created a La Nina since last fall. La Nina winters are generally cool and wet in Washington, but are warm and dry farther south.

Forecasters at NOAA and Columbia University's Climate Institute placed a 53% chance on La Nina prevailing again next winter, compared to 40% for neutral conditions and 7% for an El Nino.

Some past El Nino winters have led to low snowpacks and summer droughts in Washington, including in 2015. This year, the state's

La Nina-swollen snowpack has held up through a dry, but not hot, spring.

Washington Department of Ecology drought coordinator Jeff Marti said Thursday that conditions are looking favorable for irrigated farmland, but not so for unirrigated farmland.

"It's an interesting set of conditions right now. We had a really good snowpack and still do for most of the state, but we've had a really dry spring, especially in the Columbia Basin," he said.

Several weather stations in the basin had their driest

April on record, following a dry March, according to the Office of the Washington State Climatologist.

The U.S. Drought Monitor on Thursday classified 20% of Washington in a "severe drought," the second driest of four drought categories. Another 33% of the state is in "moderate drought."

In Western Washington, parts of Clark and Cowlitz counties are in a severe drought. The dry spring, however, has made farming conditions good west of the Cascades, according to the USDA's weekly crop report.



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