

## Drought

## As drought deepens, no state declaration planned in Washington

By DON JENKINS  
Capital Press

The Washington Department of Ecology has no plans to move forward with declaring a drought, as Eastern Washington bakes and wheat farmers harvest smaller crops.

Ecology drought coordinator Jeff Marti acknowledged Friday that dryland wheat farmers are being “hammered” by the second-driest spring in state history followed by heat waves.

A drought declaration, however, won't bring water to non-irrigated farmland, he said. “I want to make sure that if we do declare drought, it is to accomplish something and be an actual benefit.”

Ecology's water-supply committee met June 25 to look at current conditions and summer forecasts. A large snowpack continues to melt, filling reservoirs that serve Seattle and Tacoma residents, and Yakima Valley irrigation districts.

Meanwhile, Washington's wheat-producing counties that rely on rain are in an “extreme drought,” according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

Wheat farmers in coun-



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The Washington wheat industry asked Gov. Jay Inslee to declare a drought emergency, but his administration says it would not be particularly useful.

ties such as Benton, Yakima and Klickitat are seeing complete crop losses, Washington Association of Wheat Growers executive director Michelle Hennings said.

“Many counties in Eastern Washington are looking at below average for their wheat crop this harvest,” she said.

By metrics that reflect how dry the air and ground are, some places, such as Walla Walla and Moses Lake, already are in “exceptional drought,” the worst of four drought classifications.

Assistant State Climatologist Karin Bumbaco said in an interview the drought probably will deepen after snow melts. “Once streams drop, I believe the Drought Monitor will be worse,” she

said.

Washington's wheat industry sent Gov. Jay Inslee a letter in mid-June asking for a drought declaration. The groups said a declaration would help farmers obtain federal aid.

The Inslee administration rejected the request June 24 with a letter from Ecology Director Laura Watson.

Under a drought declaration, Ecology can relieve water shortages by transferring irrigation rights or authorizing emergency wells. That won't help dryland farmers who need rain, Watson wrote.

“For this reason, a state drought emergency declaration would not be particularly useful for wheat growers, and we have no plans

to recommend one at this time,” she stated.

Watson said farmers can gain relief through crop insurance or Farm Service Agency assistance that's triggered by federal drought status.

The Drought Monitor will qualify wheat farmers for assistance, though aid also can be triggered by a governor declaring an emergency.

Wheat farmers wanted to make the governor aware of drought losses, Hennings said.

The association “thought it was vital we inform our state of the current negative situation our farmers are experiencing and to inquire if there is anything that can be done at the state level,” she said.



Trista Crossley/WAWG

Fairfield, Wash., wheat farmer Lonnie Green, right, shows National Association of Wheat Growers CEO Chandler Goule, left, and Washington Association of Wheat Growers executive director Michelle Hennings how tall wheat is normally during Goule's visit to the region in June.

## ‘Early and fast’ wheat harvest in Washington because of drought

By MATTHEW WEAVER  
Capital Press

Drought means Washington's wheat harvest will be “early and fast,” industry leaders say.

“They're not going to have the bushels to cut like they do normally,” said Michelle Hennings, executive director of the Washington Association of Wheat Growers. “It's not going to be a bumper crop by any means. It's going to be below average, for sure.”

Winter wheat yields are estimated to be 57 bushels per acre, said Glen Squires, CEO of the Washington Grain Commission. Spring wheat yields are expected to be lower as well.

The average winter wheat yield in 2020 was 76 bushels an acre. The average spring wheat yield was 61 bushels an acre.

“The 2021 crop season is one of the most challenging faced by the industry,” Squires said.

The drought, low soil moisture, high temperatures and temperature swings during development all put the crop under stress, which reduces yields, increases protein levels and affects test weights.

Harvest could be a week to two weeks early, Hennings said.

“Now that we're seeing 100-degree weather for over a week, it's going to really push the wheat along quickly,” she said.

The heat will ripen the wheat faster, Hennings said.

“The damage has already been done because of the drought,” she said.

Winter wheat ranges from OK in certain areas to crop failures in dryland areas, Hennings said. Spring wheat doesn't look good across the state, she said.

Hennings expects the harvest to get fully underway during the next week.

She said harvest has likely begun in Benton, Yakima and Klickitat counties, the areas where it typically starts first.

“They don't have much of a crop, either,” she said. “There's a lot of complete crop loss over there.”

Nicole Berg, Pateron, Wash., wheat farmer and vice president of the National Association of Wheat Growers, uses a 12-inch-tall coat hanger as a gauge to determine the height of her wheat. That's the height farmers run their combines, she said.

A crop insurance agent assessed her wheat would yield 0.5 bushels per acre.

If wheat is priced at \$6.50 per bushel, that means Berg couldn't buy a cup of coffee at Starbucks off an acre of wheat, she added.

“It's just, it's a drought,” she said. “Droughts cycle, weather cycles, we're in an extreme drought situation and now we have extreme temperatures. It's been a wild ride.”

## Sheep ranchers face hard decisions during drought

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN  
Capital Press

Across the water-starved West, sheep ranchers are making tough decisions.

Facing withered pastures, climbing hay costs and scant water, many are thinning their flocks. Others are thinking of leaving the industry.

In Southern Oregon, many pastures are already parched.

Dee Samson, 65, a longtime rancher in Oregon's Klamath Basin, anticipated the water shortage and last year reduced her flock of North Country Cheviots by 25%. She also planned ahead by conserving water, planting new forage combinations and preparing to wean and sell her lambs a month earlier than usual.

Despite her efforts, Samson's farm is hurting.

“We're seriously affected,” she said.

Her property lies within Shasta View Irrigation District, so she has experienced water cuts.

Samson would like to continue her operation another 10 years, but if the water crisis continues, she said she doesn't know how long she can make it.



Courtesy of Dee Samson

Dee Samson, a sheep rancher in the Klamath Basin of Oregon, with her North Country Cheviot sheep.

“I'm not very young anymore and I'm getting tired of fighting for survival,” she said.

Samson grows alfalfa, so she will have hay this summer, but likely only through second cutting.

The hay shortage is severe.

According to USDA hay market price reports, June 2021 freight-on-board alfalfa hay prices are up to 50% higher than June of last year.

Cindy Siemsen, also in Klamath County, said her pasture is so dry she hasn't stopped feeding supplemental hay — mostly low-nutrient “grain hay” — since last October. Due to shortages in her immediate area, Siemsen recently had hay

hauled in from Medford, about a 170-mile round trip. “It's been extra expensive,” said Siemsen.

Siemsen said she's also worried about drinking water. Typically marshy areas of her property are bone-dry, signaling to her the aquifer that supplies her well may be lower.

Paul Lewis, 79, who raises about 700 White Dorper breeding ewes in Bonanza, Ore., said he's more fortunate because his permitted well can still irrigate the ground, but he's worried about his cattle on leased land.

Liz Hubbard, another Bonanza sheep rancher, said the drought hasn't impacted her much yet, “although we know it will

and are making plans.”

California sheep ranchers, too, are facing severe drought.

Some ranchers are driving their sheep to other states in search of forage.

Ed Anchordoguy, president of the California Wool Growers Association, said people statewide, including himself, are cutting flock sizes — “trying to reduce mouths you have to feed.”

Rebecca King, who runs a dairy sheep operation in Santa Cruz County, Calif., said she's culling more adult ewes to improve her genetics and cut feed costs this year.

The silver lining is that live lamb and meat prices are strong, with restaurants coming back and demand surging. King intends to sell extra sausage this year.

Andree Soares, who runs one of California's largest targeted grazing operations, said although she's worried about the drought, she's more concerned about the state's upcoming overtime wage hike for herders.

“The sheep industry will make it through this drought,” she said, “But we will not make it through if this wage increase happens.”



EO Media Group File

Higher protein levels in soft white wheat worry industry leaders.

## Wheat exporters work with overseas buyers on protein levels

By MATTHEW WEAVER  
Capital Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — Many overseas markets have a long established maximum 10.5% protein specification for soft white wheat.

This can create a challenge for handlers and exporters this year because drought tends to increase protein levels in wheat, said Glen Squires, CEO of the Washington Grain Commission.

Some markets may relax those specifications in a drought year such as this, he said.

“We are expecting buyers will be able to work with their suppliers to enable them to receive wheat that will meet their needs,” Squires said.

The grain commission and U.S. Wheat Associates, the overseas marketing arm of the industry, are encour-

aging overseas buyers to use the solvent retention capacity test. The test helps to identify the baking quality of wheat, Squires said.

The Northwest drought comes at a time when overseas demand for wheat is up.

China entered the soft white market last year and purchased over 1 million metric tons, Squires noted.

This, coupled with increased demand from South Korea and strong demand from other regular customers including the industry's top buyer, the Philippines, means ending stocks for white wheat are low, so there is less old crop lower protein wheat available for blending.

“We have a reputation for reliable high quality wheat and we have several customers who are committed to our soft white wheat — purchasing regardless of the price,” Squires said. “We trust that will continue.”

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