

# Drought threatens fall wheat planting in parts of E. Washington

Researcher: 'We need a soaker'

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**  
Capital Press

LIND, Wash. — A dearth of soil moisture due to drought might not allow researchers to plant wheat this fall at Washington State University's dryland research station, and farmers in other parts of the region might face the same problem.

Seed zone volumetric water content measurements last week showed less than 9% at 5 inches, Bill Schillinger, director of the station at Lind, Wash., told the Capital Press.

Dryland wheat farmers need at least 10% water volume at 5 inches deep to have a realistic chance of a wheat seedling emerging.

The instrument measures water to a depth of 13 inches. The researchers need to be sure there is water below the level of seed placement to move up and replace what's being diminished, Schillinger said.

The station has a tendency to lose even more water in August, Schillinger said. The nights are cooler, setting up a gradient for the



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press File

**Washington State University Dryland Research Station director Bill Schillinger says soil moisture levels have dropped low enough that fall planting is in question at the station.**

movement of water from a warmer area to a cooler area.

"If it's dry now, it will likely be drier a month from now when the farmers start seeding," Schillinger said.

In the past century, there have only been two crop years drier than 2021, Schillinger said. Crop year precipitation is measured between Sept. 1 and Aug. 31.

The average crop-year precipitation was 4.8 inches in 1930 and 4.36 inches in 1977. This year the

average is 4.9 inches, with August remaining to be seen.

"This is not the driest," Schillinger said. He paused. "It might be the worst, with all the timing."

The 100-year average precipitation at the Lind station is 9.63 inches.

At least a "good, solid" half-inch of rain over one or two days would be the best solution.

"We need a soaker," Schillinger said. "Oh, my God, that would change everything."

It would need to "wet up," reaching the moisture line in the soil below. That's important because the moisture below won't go through a dry layer of soil to surface moisture. The seedlings become drought-stressed and yields suffer.

If such surface moisture increases after a "wet up" rain, Schillinger recommends farmers plant.

It wouldn't be the first time the station hasn't been able to plant in the fall, Schillinger said. Researchers are able to plant about 90% of the time. The moisture would slowly replenish in the soil, recharging over winter.

"But it's not a rosy story for next year's winter wheat crop if we can't plant early for high yield potential," he said.

In Schillinger's experimental trials on Ron Jirava's farm in Ritzville, 15 miles northeast of Lind, measurements showed 11.5% moisture at 5 inches, meaning that winter wheat planted now would likely result in a stand.

"Will we get a stand if it doesn't rain in the next month at Ritzville? We will see," Schillinger said. Schillinger has historically

been to establish an early stand in Ritzville.

The prime seeding time is about the last week of August through Sept. 15, Schillinger said. An early stand of wheat is important in south-central Washington's dry region. Farmers generally take a 35% yield hit if they have to wait until fall rains, which typically begin in October.

"The later you plant the wheat, the less its yield potential," he said.

A "wet up" rain between Aug. 1 and Sept. 15 is about 22% likely.

"Not good, but it could happen," Schillinger said. "If that happens, it could be a game-changer."

If so, Schillinger recommends farmers "seriously consider dropping everything" and planting winter canola 1.5 inches deep.

"With 28 cents a pound, ooh, that is way worth the chance," he said.

What can we learn from a drought like this?

"They happen," Schillinger said.

His advice to farmers: "Hang in there, it will get better," he said. "We've been through this before. So have your fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers. And you're still here."

## Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer posts five-year gain

By **BRAD CARLSON**  
Capital Press

The Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer gained 2.3 million acre-feet of water in the past five years despite losing 550,000 in the last year due to low snowpack and runoff, the Idaho Water Resource Board said.

The aquifer lies beneath much of southeastern and south-central Idaho. Its decline over decades reflects factors including drought, increased residential and commercial water use, and improved, less leaky irrigation infrastructure.

State-led recharge operations from October to April return available surface water to it. The aquifer also benefits from other management practices by the state and water users.

"We have to persevere through the dry years," IWRB hydrologist Mike McVay said in a release from the board. "That's hard. But we have to keep moving forward with the program and make the most of the wet years to recharge the aquifer."

The board's recharge program aims to send an annual average of 250,000 acre-feet into the aquifer. A 2015 settlement agreement between the Surface Water Coalition, which includes canal companies, and the Idaho Ground Water Appropriators requires a 240,000-acre-foot annual reduction in consumptive use. Additionally, a coalition of cities is reducing annual usage by 7,650 acre-feet.

The board said the aquifer

would contain 1.2 million acre-feet less water without these programs.

The state recharge program in 2020-21 returned just over 130,000 acre-feet of available surface water back into the aquifer, manager Wesley Hipke said. The year-earlier total was 450,000 on decent overall supply and additional recharge capacity built.

From fall 2014 to spring 2021, the board has returned an annual average of 260,000 acre-feet to the aquifer, he said. The board had not developed much recharge capacity in the first two years, which were fairly dry. As capacity increased, recharge operations took greater advantage of four high-water years and a solid 2019-20.

## Cattle numbers declining

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**  
Capital Press

USDA's mid-year cattle inventory and cattle on feed reports were both bullish for cattle producers, showing year-over-year declines in cattle numbers.

Total inventory of all U.S. beef and dairy cattle on July 1 was down 1.3% to 100.9 million head. The number of cattle being fed for slaughter in large feedlots was also down 1.3% to 11.3 million.

The inventory report also suggests tighter supplies ahead. While the 2021 calf crop is projected to be only slightly lower year over year, the number of beef cows was down 2% and replacement beef heifers were down 2.3%.

The report also estimated feeder cattle supplies outside of large feedlots at 1.6% lower than a year earlier, with the total inventory in all feedlots, not just large ones, down 1.5%.

Both of the reports were positive in direction, and both were bullish in what was expected, said Don Close, senior animal protein analyst with Rabobank.

The industry was anticipating the right direction, but the decline in numbers was more aggressive than the market anticipated, he said.



S. John Collins/Baker City Herald File

**Total inventory of all U.S. beef and dairy cattle on July 1, 2021, was down 1.3% to 100.9 million head. The number of cattle being fed for slaughter in large feedlots was also down 1.3% to 11.3 million.**

"We actually got positive news for a change," he said.

The decline in cattle on feed showed the market is finally working through the backlog of COVID cattle. The decline in overall inventory was more of an indication of drought in the West, with producers unwilling to buy hay at these high prices, he said.

Every category in the inventory report was on the low side, but the 2% decline in beef cow numbers was a big surprise, he said.

Cattle markets are already starting to see some recovery, with fed cattle trending toward \$130 per hundredweight by year's

end. That price could rally to \$135 in the spring, he said.

Given the price of feeder cattle, there's a slug of calculated feed yard breakevens at \$135 to \$140, even as high as \$150 from some auction prices out there, he said.

"The prices these guys are willing to pay for feeder cattle looks like they're betting it all to me," he said.

The Chicago Mercantile Exchange feeder cattle index on 850-weight steers is in the \$152 to \$154 slot. Fall future prices are in the low to mid \$160 level, he said.

"I think the market's ahead of itself, particularly with the feeding uncertainty and vulnerability in the corn market," he said.

Given the drought, he thinks calves and feeder cattle are both going to move earlier this year. The bulk of those cattle could already have moved by October and early November, he said.

Farther out, a smaller calf crop and additional cow liquidation could bring a sizeable decline in feeder cattle outside feed yards a year from now, he said.

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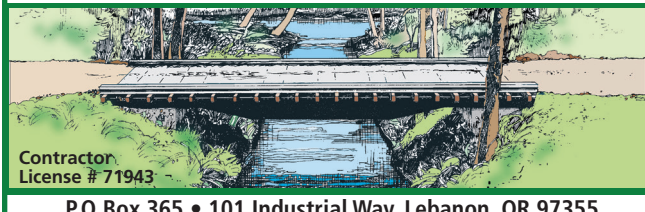
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**Hazelnut Growers Bargaining Association Annual Meeting**  
August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021 @ West Salem Roth's  
RSVP by August 20<sup>th</sup>

- > 8:30 a.m. Coffee & Refreshments
  - > 9:00 a.m. Meeting
- Board member elections to be held

**Must be a member to attend.**  
To join, see contact information below.

Please RSVP by August 20<sup>th</sup>

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