

Drought: 'I don't think we can go through this again'

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Cody Dodson

For Dodson, 30, the future of his family's farm rests squarely on his shoulders.

He is the stepson of Frank Prosser, whose father, Jess, was awarded the original homestead in 1946 as part of a lottery for World War II veterans. Jess' name was drawn number 11 out of the pickle jar, and his contract with the government promised him and his heirs water for life to farm in the Klamath Project.

Frank Prosser and his brother, John, have carried on the legacy, with Dodson joining them in 2009. Together, they now have close to 1,000 acres.

This year, however, the family was forced to cut back due to the lack of water.

It is the first time in 75 years they were unable to grow any grain — save for a small amount of barley hay — and what limited water they could secure from wells owned by the Tulelake Irrigation District is going exclusively to their alfalfa fields.

Even that is not enough, he said.

"I know they look green, but there's no more irrigation for them," Dodson said, pointing to his fields along Modoc County Road 100.

John Prosser said irrigators are paying an additional \$50 per acre to pump water from the district's wells, along with \$74 per acre for regular operations and maintenance.

Irrigation canals normally full of water are instead bone dry and choked with weeds. Domestic wells, too, are running dry without water in the ditches to recharge aquifers.

"I don't think we can go through this again with nothing but TID wells," Prosser said. "I don't know if Cody is going to be here next year."

If not for higher hay prices, Dodson said he would be operating at a loss. As it stands, he hopes to break even.

"If we can get the sur-



Erika DuVal moves a wheel line while cutting alfalfa hay in a field near Tulelake, Calif.

George Plaven/Capital Press



Tricia Hill



Luther Horsley



Don Gentry



Ben DuVal



Ry Kliever

face water, then yes, I will be here," said Dodson, who with his wife, Jordan, has two young sons, ages 4 and 1. "I don't know if that will be feasible unless something changes."

Ben DuVal

Ben DuVal leaned down and scooped up a handful of dry dirt in a field at his Tulelake farm. The dust slipped through his fingers.

Over the last two years, DuVal and his wife, Erika, have expanded their operation, doubling it from 300 to 600 acres of hay, grain and cattle.

"It was a bad year to do that," he said with a nervous chuckle. "We've had to fallow fields. Where we can get water, we're nowhere near enough."

One of those fallow fields includes a \$75,000 irrigation pivot installed last spring that, ironically, DuVal said,

was intended to boost water efficiency. Instead, it sits idle in the distance.

DuVal said several of his neighbors are helping him to survive the year, pumping water from their private wells to irrigate some of his land. Even then, his yields will be down, and the family will have to tap into personal savings to pay the bills.

"A guy shouldn't have to do that, but at the same time we're trying to maintain our business," he said.

DuVal purchased his grandfather's original homestead in 2003. He and Erika started from scratch, working to build their income to the point that they can support their family, including two teenage daughters.

This year, DuVal said, anxiety is his constant companion; it follows him like a dark cloud.

"Everybody just wants healthy, viable communi-

ties," he said. "I'm tired of seeing businesses closed, and I'm tired of seeing dry fields. It gets to a guy after a while."

Tricia Hill

Behind the wheel of her car, Tricia Hill parked in an empty field south of Klamath Falls, Ore., where last year 2,000 people arrived in trucks and tractors to prepare for a convoy calling attention to the Klamath Basin's long-standing water woes.

One year later, Hill, of Walker Farms and Gold Dust Potato Processors, said it is harder than ever to remain optimistic.

"It's starting to tear at the fabric of our communities," Hill said. "It's painful, and the stress that comes along with it, you can just see it in people."

Gold Dust and Walker Farms produces chipping and frying potatoes for major brands such as Frito-Lay. The farm typically operates on a five-year plan, looking ahead

to crop rotations needed to maintain healthy soils.

That all went out the window with this year's zero water allocation from the Klamath Project, Hill said. The farm ditched its usual schedule and focused on planting potatoes where they could pump enough groundwater to produce a full crop and satisfy their contracts.

"As a farmer, it's just really disheartening that, instead of being able to make choices that are the best for our land, we're having to make choices because, frankly, we don't have any other choice," Hill said.

As long as this summer's heat doesn't heavily impact spud yields, Hill said the farm will likely be able to meet its contracts. But the future weighs heavily on her mind. Switching crops is not as easy as it might seem, she said, given their major investments in equipment and infrastructure and years-long relationships with customers.

The 2020 rally did attract the attention of former Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, who traveled to the basin to talk with farmers. But Hill said more is needed for a long-term, sustainable solution.

"We can do better than this," she said.

Luther Horsley

Water in the canals isn't only for plants and livestock. The Klamath Project was designed so canals would recharge shallow domestic wells for the many households within its boundaries.

Luther Horsley, who raises cattle with his wife, Candy, said his domestic well ran dry in July.

"I can attest that it's challenging to live without water in your house," Horsley said. "You can't wash clothes. You can't do dishes."

The normal static levels for many of the region's wells are just 18-25 feet below ground level, Horsley said.

"Now that level has dropped another 30 feet," he said. "So a lot of these wells are just not in the water."

Horsley is a member of the Klamath Project Drought Response Agency, the local body allocating \$30 million in drought aid from the Bureau of Reclamation and USDA that was earmarked for farmers unable to irrigate in 2021.

The agency has also designed a domestic well mitigation program, he said, though it is yet to be funded. Funding would pay for drilling deeper wells, or setting pumps deeper in existing wells, Horsley said.

For now, he keeps containers in the back of his pickup truck that he fills in Klamath Falls to provide potable water to his home. He also owns a water tender that he's used for fire protection at his ranch. He hooks it up to a camp trailer to take showers.

"God only knows how long it's going to take the aquifer to recharge," he said. "It really makes you appreciate running water in your house."

Ry Kliever

Panic began to set in for rancher Ry Kliever and his brother, Ty, back in January.

At the time, the Klamath Basin was already below normal for annual precipitation and snowpack, at 69% and 87%, respectively. As months went by and drought condi-

tions deepened, Kliever said they could see the writing on the wall.

"When you get to March and you're even further behind, you know it's going to be a bad situation," he said.

Ry Kliever grows primarily certified organic hay and grain on 520 acres near Klamath Falls, while Ty raises purebred cattle for breeding stock. The brothers also run an on-farm brewery, Skyline Brewing Co., which they opened in 2018.

While the brewery's income is "pennies" compared to farming, Kliever said it does provide a little more cash during painful drought years.

Kliever said about 200 of his acres have received no water in 2021. Like DuVal, he was able to minimally irrigate the rest of his land thanks to the generosity of neighbors.

"Before this year," Kliever said, "I've never really sat down and thought about not (farming) again next year. There are a lot of days where I question whether I made a good lifestyle choice or not."

Kliever said they will do what they need to do to survive. But if 2022 is more of the same, he worries it will make this year seem like a cakewalk by comparison.

"I'm too stubborn to quit," he said. "Still, it makes you think."

Don Gentry

Don Gentry is chairman of the Klamath Tribes. He wears a beaded necklace around his neck with a spear tip carved from deer bone — similar to those used by his ancestors to catch sucker fish that once returned in abundance each year up the tributaries that feed Upper Klamath Lake.

As a teenager, Gentry remembers catching the fish for tribal elders, and hearing stories of how they sustained families after harsh winters in the basin.

"I basically absorbed what should be important to our people," he said. "I had this affirmation as a tribal member. I had a place and purpose."

In 1988, two species of suckers, known as C'waam and Koptu, were protected under the federal Endangered Species Act. In response to dramatic population declines, the tribes had cut off their own fishing for the species two years earlier, Gentry said.

According to research led by the tribes, changing conditions in Upper Klamath Lake have made it so that juvenile suckers can no longer survive past August. Lower water levels in the lake have cut off access to important rearing habitat and left the fish more susceptible to predators.

Diking and draining wetlands to convert into farmland has also contributed to higher levels of phosphorus in the lake, which contributes to major algae blooms during the summer. Once the algae decomposes, it saps dissolved oxygen in the lake, making conditions harsh for the young fish.

"We don't have younger fish coming back in and contributing to the spawning population," Gentry said. If not for the long-lived adults, he said the species would already be lost.

At least one population of C'waam has plummeted to just a few thousand surviving individuals, said Alex Gonyaw, senior fish biologist for the tribes.

At the Klamath Tribes Research Station near Chilcoquin, Ore., Gonyaw leads a program where juvenile C'waam and Koptu are raised in captivity for four years to ensure their survival before being released back into Upper Klamath Lake. He plans to release about 500 fish for the first time next spring.

However, this is meant to be only a stopgap until lake conditions for the fish improve. That means restoring habitat, increasing lake levels and improving agricultural practices, Gentry said.

"We're facing the very extinction of these hardy, strong fish," he said. "There's too many people after too little water."



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