



Ryan Brennecke/EO Media Group

Drought is impacting many cattle producers this year.

Drought taking toll on ranchers

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

The unprecedented drought across the West is taxing ranchers with tight feed and forage supplies and forcing them to make tough decisions about their animals and operations.

Niels Hansen, president of the Public Lands Council and a Rawlins, Wyo., rancher, said he has heard mixed reports from ranchers in his region about the drought's impact.

"Some people are getting some rain and doing pretty good and holding on, and a lot of people are hurting really bad," he said during a webinar hosted by Farm Journal.

"We've seen people making major adjustments as far back as April to changing their plans, maybe moving stock off the ranch," he said.

A friend of his was feeding hay to his cows clear into June, waiting for his high country to improve so he could turn them out on the range, he said.

"We get reports similar to that all over, and I'm sure everybody is in the same boat that we're all sitting here now and looking

toward the future and trying to get down what these feed costs are going to be for the winter so that we can make plans in that direction," he said.

"We're all struggling and just trying to work our way through," he said.

Others on the webinar reported similar situations.

"It's a dire situation," said Larry Schnell, partner and general manager of Stockmen's Livestock Exchange in Dickinson, N.D.

"The older ranchers are telling us that this is as bad as they've seen it," he said.

The last decent rains in the region were in September 2019, and that got ranchers through 2020 with close to half their usual hay crop.

But it's a different story this year, he said.

"A lot of people aren't even cutting it. But if they're cutting it at all, they're talking about one bale per acre — some of them less than that. They're talking about acres per bale," he said.

As for other feed, there's more corn in the area than there used to be, but the nitrates are very high. The same is true for wheat and other grains, he said.

"So it's a very dire situation," he said.

It's a similar situation in Eastern Oregon — maybe a little behind North Dakota, said Jason Johnson, who manages Producers Livestock Marketing and runs a backgrounding operation in Vale, Ore.

"We've been able to generate some crops this year, but we're going to be running on empty here real shortly," he said.

Producers in the area will probably be able to get through this year, but they're going to be in a tough situation next year if they don't get some significant rainfall and a good winter, he said.

A lot of smaller operators, with jobs in town, are getting out due to the cost of feed and total lack of outside forage, he said.

"The bigger operations, they're going to make it through. It's going to be a bit of a struggle, but they're going to hang in there," he said.

Some guys are feeding hay right now, and that's a big problem. So much expense is going into calves that it's not going to be economical for very long, or it's not already, he said.

Labor Secretary gets earful on Oregon farmworker conditions

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

EUGENE, Ore. — As the former mayor of a major American city, U.S. Labor Secretary Marty Walsh admits he faces a steep learning curve regarding farmworker regulations.

"This area is kind of new to me. They don't have farms in Boston," Walsh said Aug. 10 during a roundtable on farmworker protections in Eugene, Ore.

However, Walsh said he appreciates the hard work that goes into agriculture, as both his parents grew up on farms in Ireland before immigrating to the U.S. in the 1950s.

"I know that food did not just appear on my plate," he said. "I know it came from a worker's hands."

After hearing from farmworker representatives, Walsh said he planned to look into several problems discussed at the roundtable, such as changing coronavirus restrictions and growing safety threats from heat and wildfire smoke.

"The last 18 months have been completely devastating," he said.

The lack of higher overtime wages and the powerful role of labor contractors are also unique to the farm industry, he said.

"Rules that apply to the 40-hour worker don't apply to the farmworker," Walsh said.

There are currently immigration proposals floating around Washington, D.C., that are specific to "essential workers" and people who arrived in the U.S. as children, but Walsh said he'd prefer more comprehensive legislation to be introduced.

"I think we actually need



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

U.S. Labor Secretary Marty Walsh at a farmworker roundtable Aug. 10 in Eugene, Ore.

to go bigger than that," he said.

Roundtable panelists said the coronavirus pandemic has aggravated problems that existed before in the farm industry, such as workers fearing to report labor violations due to potential retaliation.

The possibility of losing a job doesn't seem worthwhile when employers would only receive nominal fines for violating safety protocols, said Valentin Sanchez, senior community educator with the Oregon Law Center.

Oregon's Occupational Safety and Health Administration is influenced by the federal OSHA, but that agency's standards are outdated, he said.

"We are setting the bar so low," Sanchez said.

Sanchez urged more funding for on-site inspections as well as recognition that many farmworkers speak indigenous languages, not Spanish.

"We need to develop educational materials in these different lan-

guages," he said.

Farmers are increasingly reliant on labor contractors for hiring, which effectively makes them less responsible for worker safety, said Jennifer Martinez-Medina, a doctoral candidate at Portland State University who facilitated a study on coronavirus impacts.

Though farmers are jointly liable with contractors for following labor law, the system creates another hindrance for workers to report violations, she said.

Labor contractors and personnel agencies are also less accountable for violating regulations, she said. "Farm labor contractors can dissolve and come back with a different name."

Apart from the farmworker roundtable, Walsh toured a training facility for plumbers and steamfitters in Springfield, Ore.

He joked that he'd planned to visit farms unannounced but appreciated the input from the roundtable instead.

"Let me work on this stuff," Walsh said.

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