

# Winter storms bring much-needed snow to Oregon

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**  
Capital Press

PORTLAND — Despite ample snowpack following a series of heavy winter storms, Oregon water managers say it is still too early to draw any conclusions about what the summer irrigation season will bring.

As of Jan. 10, snow-water equivalent — that's the amount of water contained in snow — was 138% of the 30-year median from 1991 to 2020. Every basin is measuring above average, ranging from 113% in the Malheur Basin to 195% in the Hood, Sandy and Lower Deschutes basins.

Yet according to the U.S. Drought Monitor, nearly 96% of Oregon remains in some stage of drought, including 50% in "extreme" and "exceptional" drought, the two highest categories.

Scott Oviatt, snow survey supervisor for the USDA Natural Resources Conserva-

tion Service in Portland, said the apparent discrepancy is the result of two consecutive dry water years dating back to Oct. 1, 2019.

In short, a few weeks of intense rain and snow is not enough to make up deficits in Oregon's most drought-stricken areas.

"It's going to take significant precipitation to let the groundwater, let alone surface water, recover long-term," Oviatt said.

While snow piling up in the mountains is a positive sign, region managers for the Oregon Water Resources Department are cautioning irrigators to plan ahead as they claw their way back from record low stream flows and reservoir storage, particularly east of the Cascade Range.

## South-central Region

Kyle Gorman manages the agency's South-central Region, which includes the Upper Deschutes and

Crooked river basins down into Klamath and Lake counties. His region has experienced some of the most critical drought conditions, leading to water shortages in 2021.

Wickiup Reservoir, with 200,000 acre-feet of storage capacity, ran out of water in mid-August, the earliest that's happened since it was built in 1947. The reservoir provides all water supplies for the North Unit Irrigation District, serving 59,000 acres of farmland in Jefferson County.

"That was the third of the last four years where Wickiup Reservoir and North Unit Irrigation District ran out of water," Gorman said. "That fact tells the story of how low the discharge from the Deschutes River is, and the system itself in the overall production of water."

Gorman does not predict Wickiup Reservoir will fill this year, regardless of how much snow falls this winter.

Ten years of below-av-

erage precipitation in the Deschutes Basin is also taking its toll on groundwater-fed springs and streams. For example, Fall River, a tributary of the Deschutes River, has a 30% reduction in discharge.

"You can't just point your finger at one thing," Gorman said. "There are a lot of factors and time involved in carryover of water."

## East Region

Jason Spriet, OWRD East Region manager, said they too have a lot of catching up to do. Phillips Reservoir, near Baker City, was emptied a year ago and is just 1% refilled. It is fed by the Powder River, and provides water storage for 30,000 acres in the Baker Valley Irrigation District.

"I hate to be terribly pessimistic, but I wouldn't expect to fill it this year unless we get a lot of snow," Spriet said.

Farther southeast, Owyhee Reservoir in Malheur County is 17% filled. It must reach at

least 50% for the Owyhee Irrigation District to allocate full water supplies for the season.

"They have a ways to go," Spriet said. "It's a giant reservoir."

## Willamette Basin

It is a different story across the state in the Willamette Basin, where most of Oregon's high-value crops are grown. Unlike other regions, the system is more rain-driven, and less reliant in mountain snowpack.

Thirteen reservoirs operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers stretching from Portland to south of Eugene will not begin storing water for the summer until February, said Mike McCord, OWRD Northwest Region manager.

Last year, water rights were regulated in some areas, including the Molalla River, due to low streamflows, McCord said, affecting irrigators and municipalities. A lack of spring rain set the system back, and it was

never able to recover.

Wet weather in recent weeks is encouraging, McCord said, but he cannot predict what will happen in the next 3 to 4 months.

"We're still certainly concerned about drought," he said. "This burst of weather that we've got right now doesn't make it go away."

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Prediction Center calls for an elevated chance of above-average temperatures across Oregon over the next three months and a slightly elevated chance for above-average precipitation.

Oviatt, with the NRCS, said the state must see continued snow accumulation in the mountains and a cooler spring to keep that snow from melting too quickly to avoid another difficult irrigation season.

"It's a tough situation to try to pin down, and it's becoming more difficult with more extreme and widely variable conditions," he said.

## Oregon DEQ fines Port of Morrow \$1.3 million over nitrate violations

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**  
Capital Press

BOARDMAN, Ore. — Oregon environmental regulators have fined the Port of Morrow \$1.3 million for repeatedly over-applying agricultural wastewater on nearby farms in an area that already has elevated levels of groundwater nitrates.

The state Department of Environmental Quality announced the fine on Jan. 11.

Under a DEQ water quality permit, the port collects nitrogen-rich wastewater from food processors, storage facilities and data centers at its industrial parks near Boardman, which it then reuses to irrigate neighboring farm fields growing potatoes, onions and other high-value crops.

But according to the agency, the port violated its permit more than 1,000 times from 2018 to 2021, exceeding the limit on how much nitrogen can be safely applied to farmland and resulting in 165 tons of excess nitrogen in the fields.

Leah Feldon, DEQ deputy director, said these are "serious violations of water quality regulations that are in place to protect public health and the environment."

protect public health and the environment."

The Port of Morrow is Oregon's second-largest port, behind only the Port of Portland. It is in the Umatilla Basin of northeast Oregon, where in 1990 the state declared a Groundwater Management Area due to high levels of groundwater nitrates exceeding 7 milligrams per liter.

In a statement, Ryan Neal, the port's general manager, said it takes the violations seriously and will work in collaboration with DEQ toward finding a long-term solution that benefits local farmers, port industries and the region as a whole.

"The Port of Morrow has been working collaboratively with DEQ on the content of this action," Neal said. "We look forward to jointly developing a resolution."

High levels of nitrates in drinking water are linked with serious health concerns, particularly for babies and pregnant women. Groundwater is used as a primary source of drinking water across the basin, which spans northern Umatilla and Morrow counties — including the cities of Hermiston, Boardman, Irrigon, Stanfield and Echo.

## Livestock disaster assistance deadlines near

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**  
Capital Press

USDA's Farm Service Agency is urging livestock producers who faced drought-related feed issues in 2021 to file applications for disaster assistance.

The deadline for both the Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees and Farm-raised Fish Program (ELAP) and the Livestock Forage Disaster Program is Jan. 30.

"The drought that is so pervasive in the West is where a lot of our disaster assistance is going to be," said Zach Ducheneaux, FSA administrator.

"Nearly everything West of the Mississippi has experienced some drought," he said.

Early on in the drought, the USDA secretary challenged FSA to find some flexibility in disaster assis-



George Plaven/Capital Press File

**A portion of the 60-mile Lost River, which feeds Tule Lake, is dry because of drought in the Klamath Basin. The application deadline is approaching for federal help to ranchers who have experienced drought losses.**

tance to help producers, he said.

FSA updated ELAP to cover feed transportation costs where grazing and hay resources have been depleted. It also lowered its drought-intensity threshold for assistance in the cost of hauling water to livestock.

Under ELAP, USDA will reimburse eligible ranchers 60% of feed transportation costs above what would have been incurred in a nor-

mal year. Producers qualifying as underserved will be reimbursed 90%.

USDA uses a national calculation of \$6.60 per mile before the 60% is applied to determine reimbursement costs. The calculation does not include the first 25 miles and distances exceeding 1,000 miles. It also excludes the normal costs to transport hay or feed if the producer normally purchases some feed.

## Dead wolf found in E. Oregon likely shot

WALLOWA, Ore. — Oregon State Police are seeking information about a dead wolf that was found in Wallowa County after apparently being shot.

A citizen reported the wolf carcass to OSP about 10:36 a.m. on Jan. 8. The wolf was along Parsnip Creek Road about 6 miles southeast of Wallowa.

The wolf, which was fitted with a tracking collar, is a 2-year-old female that had dispersed from the Chesnimus Pack, according to a press release from OSP.

The initial investigation found the wolf had been shot.

**We've Got You Covered**



**Fulvic Acids, Humic Acids, Silicas & Amino Acids**



**The Willamette Valley's Biological Hub Since 1981**

Call: 855-844-4632 | sales@bioag.com

5273040-1

**BigIron AUCTIONS**

**THE MARKET IS HOT!**

**CHECK OUT OUR RECENT AUCTION RESULTS!**



**\$255,750**

**2019 JOHN DEERE S780 COMBINE**



**\$300,120**

**2020 JOHN DEERE R4045 SELF-PROPELLED SPRAYER**



**\$220,500**

**2015 JOHN DEERE 9570R 4WD TRACTOR**

**GOT EQUIPMENT TO SELL?**

**(800) 937-3558 | WWW.BIGIRON.COM**

5277295-1

**SPOKANE AGSHOW**  
CULTIVATED BY GSI

**We're Back!**  
**MEET. LEARN. GROW.**



**FEB 1-3, 2022**

**SPOKANE CONVENTION CENTER**

**AgShow.org**

*No proof of vaccine or negative test required*

5276340-1