

# Low reservoir levels foretell another lean irrigation year in Central, Southern Oregon

By **GEORGE PLAGVEN**  
Capital Press

MEDFORD, Ore. — Last year was unlike anything Wanda Derry had ever seen before at the Talent Irrigation District in southwest Oregon.

With the region in severe drought, there was only enough water stored in the district's reservoirs to last five weeks during the summer irrigation season. Famous Rogue Valley pears went unharvested, and hay fields that would normally get two or three cuttings struggled to muster one.

"It was devastating," said Derry, the district manager. "I know for a fact that a lot

of orchards weren't able to harvest at all, because they didn't have enough water." Derry said 2021 was a record dry year for the system dating back to 1959. TID serves 3,000 patrons and 16,300 acres of farmland south of Medford.

As difficult as conditions were last year, 2022 could be even worse. Storage in the district's three reservoirs — Hyatt Lake, Howard Prairie Lake and Emigrant Lake — is down a combined 2,500 acre-feet compared to the same time a year ago.

The region recently suffered through its longest stretch of winter days without measurable precipita-

tion, breaking the previous record set in 1976.

"It's just not looking real good," Derry said. "We still have a little more time, but not much, and we have a lot of room to make up."

## Multi-year drought

TID is not alone. Reservoir levels are down across central and southern Oregon, in some cases well below their 30-year median, according to the state climate office.

What that means for the 2022 irrigation season remains to be seen, though farmers and ranchers are eager for answers as they decide which crops, and how much, they can grow.

Larry O'Neill, Oregon state climatologist, said dwindling reservoirs is the result of several consecutive years with below-average snowfall and precipitation. There simply hasn't been enough carryover to help refill reservoirs each year.

"This is just a reflection of many dry years in a row, and having very few recovery years," O'Neill said. "We're going through this very long, dry period."

Looking at the last two combined water years, O'Neill said eight counties recorded their lowest total precipitation on record dating back to 1895. They include Sherman, Wheeler, Jefferson, Crook, Wasco,

Deschutes, Klamath and Jackson counties.

Statewide, 16 of the last 22 water years have had below-average precipitation, O'Neill said.

"Unless we have a miracle (storm) system, this (year) will be 17 out of 23," he said.

Data from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service show reservoir levels at critical lows around Oregon. Phillips Lake, near Baker City in Eastern Oregon, is virtually empty, storing 2% of capacity. Gerber Reservoir in the Klamath Basin is similarly drained at just 4% of capacity.

Prineville Reservoir in

Central Oregon is at 19% of capacity, or 33% of its 30-year median. The much larger Owyhee Reservoir, which provides storage for the 67,000-acre Owyhee Irrigation District in southeast Oregon, is at 20% of capacity, or 56% of the median.

Both reservoirs are lower than they were at this time last year.

"I think this will be a big story this year," O'Neill said. "We saw how adverse the impacts were last year. It can only be worse this year, without some sort of historical rain event this spring or some prolonged wet period, which we are expecting less and less as the weeks go on."

# Return of the convoy: Group holds rally outside Oregon Capitol opposing timber restrictions

By **GEORGE PLAGVEN**  
Capital Press

SALEM — A large American flag hung from a crane in front of the Oregon State Capitol on Feb. 24, serving as the backdrop for a rally hosted by the grassroots group Oregon Natural Resource Industries, or ONRI.

Speakers decried a growing number of government restrictions on them and others, while hay and log trucks circled the statehouse blaring their horns for legislators inside.

The scene was reminiscent of demonstrations organized by #TimberUnity in 2019 and 2020 protesting cap-and-trade legislation. In fact, both groups share the same roots.

Jeffrey Leavy, a log truck driver from Clatskanie, is the president of ONRI and was one of the founding members of #TimberUnity. Leavy rebranded the association as ONRI on Feb. 3 following a trademark dispute with the #TimberUnity political action committee.

The rally in Salem, which drew



George Plaven/Capital Press

**Jeffrey Leavy, president of the grassroots group Oregon Natural Resource Industries and original founder of #TimberUnity, speaks during a rally Feb. 24 at the State Capitol.**

several hundred people, was an opportunity to introduce ONRI's 11 board members and included speakers opposing a litany of grievances — from mask mandates to proposed new restrictions on farming, ranching, mining and logging.

"We've been shut out of the Capitol for two years," Leavy said, referring to COVID-19 closures. "Our

voices haven't been heard."

Members pointed to the Private Forest Accord — negotiated between environmental groups and the timber industry — as a blow to small-scale loggers and landowners. The deal would widen no-harvest buffers along streams, and calls for a "habitat conservation plan" for protected species in pri-

vate forests within five years.

The Legislature is now considering Senate Bill 1501 requiring the state Board of Forestry to adopt the rules by Nov. 30.

A companion bill, SB 1502, would create tax credits for small landowners to meet the more rigorous standards, compensating them for unharvested timber.

Mike Pihl, who owns a logging company in Vernonia, said the rules strip landowners of the right to cut timber on their own property.

"What we are doing is already right," he said. "We have to keep fighting."

ONRI also opposes a bill that would turn the 93,000-acre Elliott State Forest into a research forest managed by Oregon State University.

Board member Jen Hamaker said the state is making it harder for natural resource-based businesses to remain viable by imposing increasingly stringent regulations.

"We're a natural resources state," Hamaker said. "Why they

keep on shutting us down, why they keep on encroaching on us, why they keep restricting us and regulating us and taxing us on it is beyond me."

Dave Sullivan, a retired OSU business professor and president of the Oregon Advocates for School Trust Lands, said he is suing the state for "gross illegal mismanagement" of the Elliott State Forest. He spoke at the rally, saying the forest had 600 million board-feet of timber when the state acquired it in 1930.

Today, he said, it has between 2.5 billion and 3 billion board-feet — more than four times as much timber.

"When you pack that much timber onto a small area, (come) August when there's an east wind, if there's a spark anywhere, we don't know how to stop that kind of wildfire," Sullivan said. "We're just setting us all up for a fatal catastrophe."

Leavy encouraged supporters to join ONRI, contact their legislators and push back against the state's Democratic supermajority.

# Oregon's Douglas County must reconsider farm and forest zoning decisions

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**  
Capital Press

Oregon's Douglas County must reconsider its decisions allowing new dwellings on forestland and creating a new zone for 20-acre rural home sites.

Last year, the county government changed its land use plan to allow so-called "template" dwellings in its timber resource zone.

Such dwellings are permitted if a property is already surrounded by other homes and smaller parcels, subject to statewide criteria and county land use regulations.

Farmland conservation groups — 1,000 Friends of Oregon and Friends of Douglas County — challenged that decision before the state's Land Use Board of Appeals.

In response, the county government admitted that the change didn't comply with its own comprehensive land use plan.

LUBA has now remanded the issue to the county, finding that allowing the template dwellings isn't consistent with its policy to prohibit development that's incompatible with forest management.

While Douglas County conceded the problem with the template dwellings, it defended creating the "rural transitional" zoning designation, which would allow new 20-acre home sites on

certain farmland.

In this case, LUBA rejected those arguments and ruled that the new zoning designation could negatively affect big game habitat and violates the statewide land use goal of protecting natural resources.

In 2019, Douglas County was required by LUBA to reconsider a similar plan to authorize 20-acre home sites on 22,500 acres of farmland under a new "rural open space" zoning designation.

The county argued that residential development would only be allowed on properties that aren't suitable for agriculture or timber production. LUBA ruled the new zoning designation didn't comply with farm and forest preservation goals.

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