

Drought: ‘We are coming into some tough times here in Oregon’

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longer, melting more gradually to replenish streams and rivers longer into the summer.

“That’s something we’re certainly going to be keeping an eye on,” he said.

Oregon

Larry O’Neill, Oregon state climatologist, said drought has been building over the last two years with the impacts worsening each summer.

For the last two water years — from October 2019 through September 2021 — Oregon has experienced its third-driest period dating back to 1895. Eight counties received their lowest total precipitation on record, including Sherman, Wheeler, Jefferson, Crook, Wasco, Deschutes, Klamath and Jackson counties.

About half of all streamflow gauges in Oregon managed by the U.S. Geological Survey were recording below-normal flows over the last 45 days, O’Neill said. Of those, 10% recorded record low streamflows for this time of year.

Most reservoirs are also averaging 10-30% lower storage than they were at the same time last year, foretelling another lean year for farms and fish.

“We are coming into some tough times here in Oregon,” O’Neill said. “Not only are water supply issues going to become more acute, but we’re starting to grow concerned about the general dryness of the landscape and what it means for wildfire risk.”

Eric Wise, meteorologist for the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center, said conditions “certainly have the

potential for a very active season” in central and southern Oregon.

Idaho

David Hoekema, hydrologist for the Idaho Department of Water Resources, said drought conditions in that state vary from north to south.

Southern Idaho is “definitely heading in the direction of drought,” Hoekema said, while northern Idaho “is doing a little better at this point.”

Last year, Southern Idaho had the driest spring since 1924, leaving reservoirs much lower than normal.

Hoekema focused his presentation on four basins that he said are representative of the area — the Boise, Big Wood, Big Lost and Upper Snake River systems.

The Boise Basin, he said, is close to having an adequate

water supply for the year, but will need at least normal precipitation in the coming weeks for that to happen. Otherwise, the probability drops to less than 50%.

Despite having near normal snowpack, it will take more for reservoirs in the Big Wood Basin to recover after three consecutive years of drought, Hoekema said.

“There’s kind of a memory in the system,” he said. “It takes more than an average year to recover.”

Conditions are similar in the Big Lost and Upper Snake basins. Hoekema said he anticipates there will be some water shortages in 2022, with less carryover from a year ago.

Washington

Of the three states, Washington appears to be in the best position to with-

stand drought in 2022.

Karin Bumbaco, assistant state climatologist, said overall snowpack, precipitation and reservoir storage in Washington is faring better than Oregon and southern Idaho.

“Perhaps we’re the winners this year in terms of drought,” Bumbaco said.

Water supplies in western Washington will likely be in good shape, save for parts of the Olympic Peninsula and Dungeness Valley, which have had low summer streamflows due to lower snowpack the last few years.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation released its latest forecast for reservoirs in the agriculture-rich Yakima Basin, predicting that senior water rights holders will receive a full allotment this year and junior water

right holders will get 96% of their normal water.

That doesn’t mean the state is getting off scot free, she said.

After a wet start in January, Washington’s snowpack had stalled to 89% of median as of March 3. Even with normal snowpack through the rest of the year, several basins including the Klickitat and Lower Yakima basins would still come in below normal.

Several areas east of the Cascades received less than 25% of normal precipitation from Jan. 11 through Feb. 28, which coupled with long-term deficits could spell trouble for the region’s dryland wheat farmers.

“We anticipate that there could be a possibility of continued impacts to dryland agriculture if we stay dry,” she said.

Birdseed: Studies show positive effects of wild bird feeding

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In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, interest in feeding wild birds surged, Hoysak said.

“With people spending more time at home, and working from home, bird food and feeder sales shot up,” she said. “Initially, it was a real struggle to keep up with demand.”

Many people who picked it up have stuck with it, she said.

“There have been studies that show the positive effects of wild bird feeding on mental health and how it helps alleviate depression and anxiety,” she said. “I think it’s a rewarding hobby that has brought a great deal of comfort and peace to people, especially over the last couple years.”

Sales have not slowed down, Hoysak said.

“We are seeing a new generation of birders that are excited to feed their backyard birds and share this rewarding hobby with their own children,” she said.

Most popular food

Of the hundreds of millions of pounds of birdseed Global Harvest Foods produced last year, the largest single crop input is black oil sunflower seed, the most popular food among wild birds, Hoysak said.

“It’s extremely nutritious for birds, containing high levels of healthy fat and protein, as well as vitamins and minerals,” she said. “Birds also like it because black oil sunflower shells are thin and easy for them to open. Birds love to eat it, and consumers know it will attract a broad variety of birds to their backyard.”

Consumers look for different birdseed blends depending on their geographic region, the birds they are trying to attract, and their budget, Hoysak said.

“We have decades of scientific research on the best types of seeds to offer wild birds, and we work with ornithologists to make sure our foods are best for bird health,” Hoysak said.

The company has its headquarters in Seattle and Spokane and manufacturing plants in Mead, Wash.; Akron, Colo.; Roscoe, S.D.; Harrold, S.D.; Reynolds, Ind.; and Allentown, Pa.

The company supplies bird food to major retailers across the country — mass market, discount, big box, grocery, hardware and garden stores.

U.S. farmers produced 1.3 million acres of sunflowers last year, said John Sandbakken, executive director of the National Sunflower Association, based in Mandan, N.D.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Bud Hansen is the plant manager for the Global Harvest Foods birdseed facility in Mead, Wash.



Global Harvest Foods

Black oil sunflower seeds are the most popular ingredient in wild bird food.

About 40% to 50% of the crop goes to birdseed each year, he said.

“There was a great upturn as far as bird feeding (during the pandemic) because obviously people were stuck at home,” Sandbakken said. “The future’s bright for bird feeding because it’s a great hobby.”

The association is always looking for opportunities to expand acreage, Sandbakken said.

Helping small farmers

As part of Global Harvest Foods’ black oil sunflower program, the company seeks smaller farms, supplies them with seed and commits to buying their crop.

“They have a guaranteed customer every year and sunflowers offer great long-term benefits to the soil,” Hoysak said. “Sunflower roots grow deep into the ground and pull up nutrients that other crops are unable to reach. This fer-

tilizes the soil and makes it fruitful for future crops, so farmers can continue to farm their land for generations to come.”

The company buys about 45% of its primary grains directly from farmers. About 10 to 12 farmers around the Pacific Northwest are in the sunflower program.

Urbat says the company is “definitely” helpful. It helps a farmer locate the seed and provides answers to questions about marketing, delivery, handling, varieties, fertilizer and chemical recommendations, he said.

The Mead plant

“I am an enthusiast, I do have bird feeders at my house,” said Bud Hansen, business unit manager at the Global Harvest Foods plant in Mead.

The plant produces more than 50 million pounds of birdseed each year. The main ingredients are sun-

flower seeds, millet, milo, wheat, barley and corn.

The company does not regularly source any other major ingredients from Washington farmers, Hoysak said.

“Occasionally maybe a truckload of something here or there, but mostly it is grown in other areas,” she said.

The minor ingredients — “gosh, there’s a lot,” Hansen said — include fruit pieces, whole or broken peanuts, “confectionary” sunflower kernels without the shell and thistle seeds.

Most farmers consider thistle a weed, but the seeds are sterilized before they arrive at the company, Hansen said.

“Finches enjoy thistles,” he said.

Mixes also include cherries, raisins, mangos and tree nuts such as walnuts and almonds.

But people should not eat the birdseed, Hansen said.

“It’s very well-documented on all of our packaging — the product is from the field, so it’s raw,” he said. “It’s not human food because there’s no process to make sure that it’s consumable for humans.”

As grain comes in from the field, it is weighed and run through an aspirator to pull light material off with air. Then it goes through a tumbling aspirator to remove more stems and sticks.

The grain drops into a multi-deck screener, removing sticks and cob on top and allowing seeds to

fall through the screens.

A second deck sifts out all of the small pieces, such as dirt particles, dust and broken kernels, considered “sub-prime” materials, Hansen said.

“Sometimes you get product from the Midwest or some place like that, it’s coming out of an elevator and it’s not always the highest cleanliness. We have to process it when we get it into the facility,” he said. “These local guys, they take great pride in trying to bring us the cleanest stuff they can.”

Hansen enjoys watching local farmers evolve in the program, as they work to provide the best birdseed possible.

“I enjoy the fact that you can drive a very short distance and go out and see a field of sunflowers,” he said. “That is just not seen in this area. It causes some backups on the road, people taking pictures.”

Attracting attention

The sunflowers are a big draw indeed. Urbat, the farmer, said the response can be “overwhelming.”

“People for the most part are pretty good about staying out of them,” he said. “Probably the worst thing is if they just let their kids run wild. It’s public access to a playground for them, but it’s our livelihood.”

Urbat puts up signs, and local news media advise people to stay out of the fields.

Birds, deer and elk do a lot of damage, Urbat said. He estimated he had more than 160 elk cause \$30,000 worth of damage last year. He expects to be compensated through a Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife program.

Urbat particularly appreciates sunflowers for how the plant grows.

“It’s just an incredible crop to watch throughout the stages of its growth,” he said.

While demand is high, the bird seed plant accepts grain on a capacity basis, said Hansen, the Mead plant manager. He recommends farmers contact the company’s purchasing group in Spokane to learn more.

Urbat plans to grow 250 to 300 acres again this year, dictated partly by the availability of land from his neighbors.

He estimates the immediate area could handle close to 7,000 acres of sunflower production.

“We’ve had as much as 3,500 acres, but we could easily double that,” he said.

Any advice to a new farmer? “It’s well-worth the enjoyment of growing them, and it’s profitable,” Urbat said.

Industry: Hemp is seeing new demand in products that have nothing to do with CBD

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At the same time, Oregon law enforcement authorities have complained to state lawmakers that hemp is being used to disguise the illegal production of marijuana, a related cannabis crop with psychoactive properties.

“When you can’t regulate an industry, it makes no sense to add more work for our regulatory agencies,” testified Nathan Sickler, Jackson County’s sheriff, during a legislative hearing last month.

The original language of SB 1564 would have

imposed a two-year moratorium on new hemp licenses, but the bill was amended so that the decision was left to counties.

The idea was to provide “local control” since the problem with sham hemp farms was mostly reported in Jackson and Josephine counties.

However, the amount of licensed hemp grown in hoop house systems common for marijuana represents less than 2% of state acreage, Whitney said.

“The data does not support the narrative at all,” he said, referring to licensed

hemp growers allegedly producing black market marijuana. “Will this really do any good? Probably not.”

Whitney said it’s commendable that lawmakers scaled back the bill’s scope in response to hemp industry concerns, but he fears the bill still sends the wrong signal.

Hemp is seeing new demand in products that have nothing to do with CBD, including bioplastics and livestock feed, he said. The crop can even be used as an alternative to lithium in batteries.

Meanwhile, carbon credits — which are sold to offset emissions — are poised

to become a new revenue source for hemp farmers, he said.

“This regulatory uncertainty is impacting the fiber and grain side,” Whitney said. “It’s suppressing the growth and development. At the time Oregon should be supporting hemp on an industrial scale, it’s trying to put restrictions on hemp.”

Mark Taylor, founder of the Southern Oregon Hemp Cooperative, said the bill could punish growers who wisely decided to stop growing hemp temporarily due to the oversupply or for crop rotation. It also blocks legit-

imate newcomers with fresh ideas from the industry.

“They’re penalizing us for their lack of pre-planning,” Taylor said of state lawmakers. “You restrict brainpower that could come in and do it better.”

Oregon hemp farmers have drastically scaled back planting in response to market conditions, which isn’t recognized by lawmakers who don’t understand the industry, Taylor said.

“The market self-adjusted and they gave no due to that whatsoever,” he said.

The state government would have been more effec-

tive with outreach and education to the hemp industry and other farmers, warning them to keep an eye out for bad actors who’d attempt illicit marijuana production, Taylor said.

“I don’t think government spends enough time on the ground,” he said. “They’re in their ivory tower.”

County restrictions would diminish the industry’s competitive spirit and amount to the government “picking winners and losers” by allowing existing growers to keep their licenses, Taylor said. “It all speaks of government overreach.”