

Drought: ‘The ag community in Washington should feel glad they’re not in Oregon’

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Overall, however, Washington is better off than Oregon.

“The ag community in Washington should feel glad they’re not in Oregon,” said Bond.

Oregon

The storm is having positive, tangible impacts in Oregon.

Larry O’Neill, state climatologist and professor at

Oregon State University, said the statewide average snow-water equivalent April 11 was at 69% of normal compared to 57% of normal last week.

“That was a good bump-up,” he said.

But farmers in different parts of Oregon face strikingly different outlooks.

As of April 11, according to Natural Resources Conservation Service’s snow survey, the snow-water equivalent in the Hood-

Sandy-Lower Deschutes watershed is at 123% of normal levels, and the Willamette watershed is at 94% of normal.

The Umatilla-Walla Walla-Willow watershed has seen decent precipitation, at 87% of normal.

Central Oregon’s snow-water equivalents range from 53% to 73% of normal. Southern and Eastern Oregon regions have as low as 28% of normal snow-water equivalent and

below-average rainfall.

“If you’re reliant on irrigation or surface water in the southeastern two-thirds of Oregon, you should have a contingency plan in place and be prepared for water shortages,” Scott Oviatt, snow survey supervisor for NRCS.

Idaho

Idaho also had a dry early spring, putting snow-pack levels at two-thirds or three-quarters of normal

across southern Idaho.

This storm pummeling the region, however, could turn the situation around.

“The cold front will delay the snow from melting. And if enough snow falls, it may add to water supplies,” said Erin Whorton, water supply specialist at NRCS’s Idaho Snow Survey.

Idaho farmers have been bracing for shortages in Boise, Owyhee, Wood, Lost, Salmon Falls and

Oakly basins and in the upper Snake basin.

Idaho is still expected to have significantly reduced water supplies and low reservoir carryovers from last year, Whorton said, for which farmers should be prepared. But this storm, she said, could “help alleviate that.”

“It’s nice that this will potentially allow the reservoirs to fill more and give us that supplemental water,” she said.

Water: ‘Obviously, there are no winners in this critical year’

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On April 11, Reclamation again announced a limited water allocation for irrigators amid a third consecutive year of extreme drought. Based on hydrologic conditions, the bureau will release an estimated 50,000 acre-feet of water from Upper Klamath Lake into the Project’s A Canal beginning April 15.

That is just 15% of the Project’s full allotment, though still a modest improvement over 2021. The rest of the stored water will remain in Upper Klamath Lake for protected sucker fish, or sent down the Klamath River to boost streamflows for coho salmon and the Yurok Tribe’s boat dance ceremony in August.

‘Coming to a head’

If not for federal drought relief programs, which pay farmers to idle land, Grant said they would not have made it through last year. He and Barnes decided they would stick it out five more years on the farm before considering their alternatives — if they can make it that long.

They also have two young children, including a 7-year-old son and 4-month-old daughter.

Their plan is to sell all or most of their 50 cattle, which will allow them to sell more of the hay they grow without having to feed their own animals.

Higher hay prices will help make up for the smaller crop, though Grant admitted he is nervous about what they will be able to produce in such dry soil. Meanwhile, inputs such as fuel and fertilizer are getting more expensive, he said.

“I think things are coming to a head,” Grant said. “It seems like there’s going to be permanent land idling happening out here. ... I don’t know if there’s going to be reliable water.”

Prolonged drought

Reclamation’s initial 2022 water allotment for the Klamath Project comes as the region is experiencing its worst drought since the 1930s.

The last three years have ranked among the five driest on record, according to the agency’s Klamath Basin Area Office. As of April 11, the Klamath Basin had received 70% of its median precipitation for the water year dating back to Oct. 1, 2021, but just 36% of median snow-water equivalent, which is the amount of water contained in the mountain snowpack.

With such difficult conditions, Ernest Conant, region director of the bureau, said officials were tasked with walking a fine line between satisfying the needs of Klamath Project farmers and protecting endangered fish in the watershed.

“Obviously, there are no winners in this critical year,” Conant said. “All interests are suffering.”

Under the bureau’s Klamath Project interim operations plan, Reclamation is required to main-



George Plaven/Capital Press

Upper Klamath Lake

tain a surface elevation of 4,142 feet in Upper Klamath Lake during April and May to provide shoreline spawning habitat for Lost River and shortnose suckers — known by the Klamath Tribes as C’waam and Koptu.

Given the drought, Conant said there is not enough water to meet that target regardless of any allotment for irrigators.

Instead, the bureau will manage the lake to maintain a minimum surface elevation of 4,138.15 feet. Current water storage and inflows suggest that will make approximately 50,000 acre-feet of water available for Klamath Project farms, Conant said.

That, however, could change if conditions worsen. A year ago, the bureau announced a Project allocation of 33,000 acre-feet before later reducing it to zero.

A small amount of water is already flowing into Project canals, which Conant said Reclamation approved for maintenance and to check for cracks, leaks and structural integrity. Water releases started March 1, totaling 630 acre-feet, which will come out of the Project allotment.

Flushing flow

Klamath Project operations must also account for the survival of threatened coho salmon in the lower Klamath River.

The interim operations plan calls for releasing a springtime “flushing flow” of water from Upper Klamath Lake downriver to wash away a deadly fish-killing parasite known as *C. shasta*, which thrives in warm, slow-moving water.

Jim Simondet, Klamath Basin branch chief for the National Marine Fisheries Service, said the disease ecosystem for salmon in the river this year indicates a high risk of *C. shasta* infection, with a “very high” density of polychaete worms that act as a host for the parasite.

Simondet said this year’s flushing flow will be approximately 25,000 acre-feet, or about half of what is



George Plaven/Capital Press

A pair of C’waam, or Lost River suckers, swimming in captivity at the Klamath Tribes Research Station near Chiloquin, Ore.

typically prescribed. That comes as major concern to tribes along the Klamath River that have struggled to revive the declining fishery.

Frankie Myers, vice chairman of the Yurok Tribe, said that while he is gratified to see the river afforded at least some protection, “it is no time to celebrate.”

“Salmon runs will continue to suffer under these conditions, and as climate change intensifies, such protections will become increasingly important,” Myers said.

David Palumbo, acting commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation, said the agency will continue to monitor the basin’s hydrology and manage conditions in coordination with irrigators, tribes and state and federal partners.

“Reclamation is dedicated to collaborating with all stakeholders to get through another difficult year and keep working toward long-term solutions for the basin,” Palumbo said.

The bureau also announced \$20 million in immediate drought assistance for farmers, and \$5 million in technical assistance for tribal projects focused on water conservation.

That’s going to compound the problem this year.”

KWUA Executive Director Paul Simmons said the water policy governing the Klamath Project is “egregious and out of balance.”

“It’s the world’s worst-kept secret that NMFS is using Klamath Project water to try to mitigate problems not caused by the Klamath Project,” Simmons said. “And when that doesn’t work, they just do it again, and then again.”

While federal drought relief does offer some money for farms to pay the bills, DuVal said it does not replace food production that is desperately needed around the world — a fact that is underscored by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, threatening the breadbasket of Europe.

“On a single acre, we can produce over 50,000 pounds of potatoes or 6,000 pounds of wheat,” he said. “This year, most of that land will not produce any food because the government is denying water for irrigation.”

A majority of producers in the Klamath Irrigation District recently voted that they want the district’s board of directors to pursue “all available avenues which are legal, moral and ethical” to deliver irrigation water — even if it breaks with Reclamation’s operating plans and jeopardizes their access to federal drought relief.

Gene Souza, the KID manager, said the board is still analyzing what options may be available to them.

“By allowing patrons to exercise their voice through a vote, they now have a good ability to understand what the patrons really want to the district to focus on this year,” Souza said.

Reclamation stated any unauthorized diversions of water would result in reductions to the Klamath Project water allocation, and possible legal action.

“It’s up to them,” Conant said in response to the KID vote, which was held March 29. “If they don’t cooperate and follow the plan as laid out, they will compromise their ability

to receive drought relief funding and be subject to some kind of action.”

Speaking up for fish

Clayton Dumont, a councilman for the Klamath Tribes, said he does not know how Reclamation can justify releasing irrigation water from Upper Klamath Lake while at the same time failing to meet its requirements for imperiled C’waam and Koptu.

“This will be the third straight year the minimum level for spawning season will not be met,” Dumont said.

In a statement, the Tribes called the 2022 operating plan “perhaps the saddest chapter yet in a long history of treaty violations visited upon us by the United States.”

C’waam and Koptu are central to the Tribes’ culture and sense of identity. The fish, which are endemic to Upper Klamath Lake, have experienced a precipitous decline. Both species were listed as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1988.

Data from the Tribes show there are fewer than 50,000 individual suckers left in the Upper Klamath River drainage. The fish once numbered in the tens of millions.

Water is needed in the lake to provide habitat, Dumont said. The Tribes are also focused on restoring wetland habitat that acted as the “kidneys” for the water system, absorbing phosphorus leached from farms that result in harmful algal blooms later in the summer.

“We think there is really a failure to take a comprehensive look at the history of degradation in the basin,” Dumont said.

Roberta Frost, secretary of the Klamath Tribes, said they are considering all options this year — including consulting with their legal team — but first need to communicate with tribal members about how the bureau’s decision may put their fisheries in danger.

“We’re not saying irrigators have no place in this basin,” Frost said. “What we’re saying is our fisheries can’t take more hits year after year and survive. We can only speak for them, because they cannot speak for themselves.”

Myers, with the Yurok Tribe, echoed that sentiment for coho salmon in the Klamath River. The coho population is 1-3% of its historical numbers. He said the upper and lower Klamath Basin once functioned as an integrated system that benefited salmon, suckers and waterfowl with minimal intervention.

“The fact that these systems now appear to be in conflict with each other is a direct result of the ecological collapse brought on by water withdrawals, the loss of Lower Klamath and Tule lakes, dams and mining,” Myers said. “It is our duty to bring this system back into balance and we will never stop working toward that goal.”