

Water

Idaho water officials forecast tight irrigation supplies

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press



Mindi Rambo/NRCS Idaho

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Snow Survey hydrologist Mark Robertson and hydrologist and water-supply specialist Erin Whorton at Mores Creek Summit snow course northeast of Boise March 31.

The snowpack is two-thirds to three-quarters of normal across much of southern Idaho after a dry start to spring.

Soils that drank in heavy fall precipitation have since dried, making it likely some snowmelt will be absorbed into the ground instead of running off into streams and rivers.

Shawn Nield, state soil scientist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Idaho, said the soil-moisture profile “has not been satisfied with the dry spring.”

“The lack of precipitation this spring across the state is giving us conditions much drier than normal, and that’s going to be a little bit of a concern as we get started with irrigation,” he said.

Snow accumulation after Jan. 8 flatlined across many basins south of the Clearwater until widespread storms arrived in early March, NRCS said in its April 1 Idaho Water Supply Outlook Report. But the snowy winter needed to make up for

low carryover in reservoirs did not materialize.

“Early April storms may lead to a second peak in snowpack this month,” Erin Whorton, NRCS Snow Survey hydrologist and water supply specialist said in a release. Snowpack will have peaked earlier than normal if little precipitation falls.

The NRCS report said that depending on upcom-

ing weather, much of Idaho “is poised to enter another summer with below normal streamflow and concerns about adequate irrigation supply.”

Water users should prepare for a short irrigation season and curtailments, NRCS said. Shortages can be expected in the Boise, Owyhee, Wood, Lost, Salmon Falls and Oakley basins, and in the upper

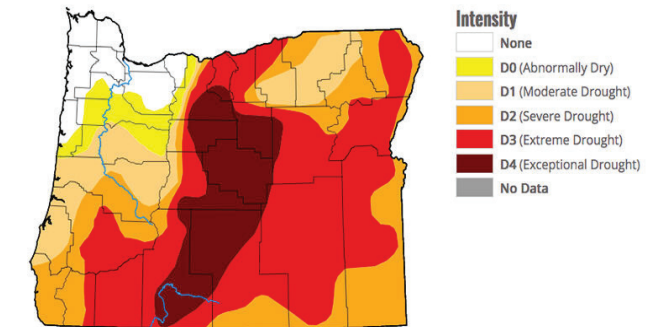
Snake basin above Heise.

State Department of Water Resources hydrologist David Hoekema said in an April 5 release that half the state is in severe drought, “and that percentage will increase in coming months. We are predicting water shortages in every basin in southern Idaho, including the Payette.”

He expects streamflow to be 20-70% of normal in the Snake, Big Lost, Big Wood, Little Wood, Salmon Falls, Payette and Weiser river basins.

NRCS said water left in reservoirs after the last irrigation season is below normal in many locations, so it is unlikely reservoirs will fill if demand starts early and exceeds natural flow during runoff season. Expected reduced runoff reflects low soil moisture and depleted shallow groundwater as well as potentially above-average summer temperatures.

Storage in Magic Reservoir on the Big Wood River is 43% of normal, and about 45 days of full water delivery is expected, NRCS said. Boise reservoir system storage is 86% of normal, and Owyhee Reservoir storage is 62%.



Oregon Drought Monitor

NOAA

Snowpack, precipitation decline across Oregon

By GEORGE PLAVERN
Capital Press

PORTLAND — March is historically when mountain snowpacks reach their apex across Oregon, but not this year.

Persistent dry weather and above-normal temperatures have led to more snowmelt and less precipitation during the month, according to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, significantly hampering the state’s drought recovery.

Every river basin is measuring below-average for precipitation compared to the 30-year median from 1991 to 2020. All but one basin is also below average for snow-water equivalent, with the Hood, Sandy and Lower Deschutes watershed being the lone exception.

In its monthly Oregon Basin Outlook Report, the NRCS predicted that, due to multi-year impacts, extensive drought will persist through early summer.

“With the historic peak for snowpack in Oregon passed and no meaningful drought reduction from the start of the water year, water users and managers in many regions should prepare for significantly reduced water supplies during the summer,” the report states.

The worst conditions are in central and southern Oregon, where irrigators are receiving just a fraction of their usual water supplies.

The Klamath, Lake County, Harney, Owyhee, Malheur and John Day basins each have less than 50% of median snow-water equivalent — the amount of water contained in snow. Conditions are slightly better farther north, though still largely below average.

Snowpack peaked for most basins in central and southern Oregon in early January following a series of winter storms that dumped several feet of snow in the Cascade Range.

However, rapid snowmelt began around mid-March and several snowpack telemetry sites east of the Cascades have recorded either their lowest or second-lowest cumulative precipitation over the last 83 days, according to the NRCS.

Overall precipitation for

the water year dating back to Oct. 1 ranges from 69% in the Malheur Basin in southeast Oregon to 98% in the Hood, Sandy and Lower Deschutes basins.

The Willamette Basin, which accounts for 40% of Oregon’s \$5.7 billion in agricultural products, is faring comparatively well with 91% of median precipitation and 78% snowpack.

Northeast Oregon is a mixed bag, with the Umatilla, Walla Walla and Willow basins at 90% of median precipitation and 72% snowpack. Farther east, the Grande Ronde, Burnt, Powder and Imnaha basins are at 81% precipitation and 65% snowpack.

The U.S. Drought Monitor shows nearly 93% of Oregon is in some stage of drought, including 15% in “exceptional” drought, the highest category. Gov. Kate Brown has declared a drought emergency in four counties, including Crook, Jefferson, Klamath and Morrow counties, giving state agencies additional flexibility managing water rights.

Counties under a governor-declared drought emergency can also apply for state and federal disaster relief funding. Another three counties, including Gilliam, Harney and Jackson counties, have requested an emergency declaration.

Drought affects both reservoir storage and streamflows that farms, fish and wildlife depend on during the irrigation season. Multiple years of drought means there is little reservoir carryover from one year to the next, resulting in critically low levels.

The NRCS reports the lowest reservoir volumes are in Southern Oregon, in some cases storing less than 25% of capacity. As of April 1, summer streamflow forecasts are also “generally below median for much of the state, with few exceptions in the Mt. Hood area.”

“With the end of the snow accumulation season approaching and the historic month for peak snowpack over, the timing and rate of melting and runoff will be the dominant factors in further shaping the outlook for summer streamflow,” the agency states.

Sustainability means water certainty, California dairy group leader says

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press



Anja Raudabaugh

With every geographic region in California coping with severe or extreme drought, water is top of mind for the state’s dairy farmers.

Due to the lack of rain across the state in the last three years, every single dairy farmer is suffering, said Anja Raudabaugh, executive director of Western United Dairies.

Even California’s North Coast, which has been unscathed in previous droughts, is affected. And farmers there don’t even have access to groundwater and won’t have water for their livestock starting in May, she said during the latest “Dairy Download” podcast.

“So this is a severe crisis. It, of course, has larger ramifications on the feed cost,” she said.

Last year, WUD designated a new sustainability role beyond environmental and regulatory standards around air quality, water quality and methane reduction, she said.

It became apparent to WUD “that we could not have any efforts in sustainability if we didn’t have water and access to resources that would get us either paid for the loss of water or paid to access more expensive water transfers,” she said.

WUD decided as an organization that sustainability meant water certainty and brought in a new director of sustainability to address the issues, she said.

“So essentially the two things that we’re looking at are how do we find drought resources for farmers to keep them in business during this hard time, which will hopefully offset some of their higher feed prices. And then the second thing we started to see we needed help with is something called land flexation,” she said.

Farmers are being forced to fallow ground with no payments and no consideration for the bank notes that are on those properties, she said.

“We set out on a policy side to make sure that a farmer’s water rights were attached legally to his land ownership and mineral rights,” she said.

WUD was successful at establishing a statewide policy that groundwater throughout the Central Valley, which is the majority of the state’s milkshed, shall go for no less than \$750 an acre-foot, she said.

Under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, the state will

pay farmers in a designated critically overdraft basin for water saved — not pumped and kept in the ground for local communities, she said.

That has been a huge effort WUD has lifted because farmers were being told to just fallow, and they weren’t being compensated for it, she said.

The water issue in California is broader than the drought, she said.

“The regulatory policy, which is to remove water rights from the system away from people that have had them for centuries, is very much in play,” she said.

But generally, the state’s water system was built to supply 21 million people and there are now 39 million people in the state. And over the last 20 years, courts have redirected about half of the water supply toward environmental purposes, she said.

In addition, irrigable acres have doubled over the last three decades due to demand and the state’s strategic position in the Pacific Rim. But that growth has come with no additional water supply. There hasn’t been a new reservoir built in the state since 1969, she said.

“So you add these things together ... we don’t have enough water, ever,” she said.

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