

# Drought likely to persist across Pacific Northwest

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**  
Capital Press

While a cool and wet spring has aided drought recovery in parts of the Northwest, climate experts in Oregon, Washington and Idaho say conditions remain critically dry in other areas with little chance of bouncing back before summer.

Nearly 70% of the region is in some stage of drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor, with 20% in “extreme” or “exceptional” drought, the two driest categories.

The most severe drought continues to be in central and southern Oregon, eastern Washington and southern Idaho. In contrast, all of western Washington and Oregon’s Willamette Valley were pulled out of drought thanks to record April rainfall.

Larry O’Neill, Oregon state climatologist, said last year had the driest spring on record statewide. This year, however, he expects the drought will be more regionally focused.

“Much of Oregon is still in drought, even though we’ve experienced this great springtime precipitation,” O’Neill said. “Only a couple parts of the state received above-normal precipitation. The rest of the state did not receive adequate precipitation.”

O’Neill was joined by Nick Bond, Washington state climatologist, and David Hoekema, hydrologist for the Idaho Department of Water Resources, during a webinar on May 18 detailing the latest



Ryan Brennecke/EO Media Group File

## Prineville Reservoir in central Oregon.

drought conditions and outlook for the Northwest.

The meeting was conducted under the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Integrated Drought Information System, which was created in 2006 to coordinate regional drought monitoring, forecasting and planning.

## Oregon

Lingering drought across much of Oregon is also due in part to well below-average precipitation, warmer weather and inadequate snowpack over the last three years, O’Neill said.

The big exception is northwest Oregon, where Portland had 5.6 inches of rain in April, setting a record. Parts of Umatilla, Union and Morrow counties in northeast Oregon have also mostly recovered

from drought after receiving 125% of normal precipitation for the water year dating back to Oct. 1.

But in the most drought-stricken areas of central and southern Oregon, O’Neill said conditions are even worse than last spring.

On April 29, the Bureau of Reclamation reported water storage in Prineville Reservoir was 28%, the lowest ever recorded for the time of year. Since then, the reservoir storage has increased slightly, to 32%. Wickiup Reservoir near Bend also remains less than half filled, at 46%.

Streamflows in the Upper Deschutes and Crooked River basins are expected to range from 44% to 90% of normal through the irrigation season, according to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, all but ensuring lackluster water supplies for irrigators.

“We expect those conditions will

continue into summer and next fall,” O’Neill said.

## Idaho

If drought has divided Oregon and Washington from east to west, then it has done the same in Idaho from north to south.

Gov. Brad Little has declared a drought emergency in 34 of 44 counties — all in central and southern Idaho.

“That drought declaration is particularly aimed at giving irrigators the ability to do emergency transfer of water rights in an expedited manner so they can have one more tool to deal with the drought,” Hoekema said.

Hoekema said April precipitation provided a much-needed boost for several key river basins in the region, particularly the Weiser, Payette, Boise, Big Wood and Snake River basins, which all received between 135% and 146% of normal precipitation for the month.

The Snake River above Heise has gained approximately 200,000 acre-feet of streamflow into reservoir storage, Hoekema said. However, that was still not enough to ensure an adequate irrigation supply given last year’s low carryover.

“We still expect (water) shortages across Southern Idaho,” Hoekema said.

## Washington

April was the third-coldest and tenth-wettest on record for Washington as a whole, though Bond said overall precipitation for the last 90

days still suggests drier than normal conditions east of the Cascades.

Going back even farther, records show that between May 2020 and April 2022, Grant and Lincoln counties experienced their eighth- and sixth-driest conditions on record for that two-year period, respectively.

The chances of ending drought across eastern Washington in the next four months are slim, Bond said, ranging from just 1% to 20% as the region enters its typical dry season.

Reclamation is predicting full irrigation supplies for the Yakima Basin, though Jeff Marti, drought coordinator for the Washington Department of Ecology, told the *Yakima Herald-Republic* there could be water restrictions in the coming months for the Okanogan, Spokane and Walla Walla basins.

Drought doesn’t only impact surface water irrigation. Bond highlighted one groundwater well near Davenport, west of Spokane, where the U.S. Geological Survey has recorded water depth dropping from just over 30 feet below ground in 2017 to more than 45 feet below ground this year.

“This is significant, because there are a lot of small water systems in Washington that rely on shallow wells like this one,” Bond said. “This groundwater also supplies water for springs and small creeks. ... These long-term declines are another reason why we’re concerned about water availability in the summer coming up.”

## Smaller NW cherry crop but good prices and quality predicted

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**  
Capital Press

Experts forecast a smaller-than-average Pacific Northwest cherry crop for 2022, according to industry estimates released this month.

In the Northwest, the cherry crop is down in size in part because of the mid-April snowstorm that swept through the region during bloom, slowing pollination and damaging some blossoms.

According to Matthew Whiting, professor and plant physiologist at Washington State University, bees rarely fly to do their pollination work in high winds or weather below 55 degrees Fahrenheit — and Washington orchards got plenty of both wind and intense cold in April.

The late spring storm and accompanying cold front had a “significant impact” on the cherry crop, Jon DeVaney, president of the Washington State Tree Fruit Association, told the Capital Press. Other tree fruit crops — including apples and pears — were not affected as much because they bloom later than cherries.

Growers across the Pacific Northwest — Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Utah and Montana — are predicting a 2022 crop of 13.6 million 20-pound box equivalents, or 136,800 tons, about two-thirds of the average volume. The 10-year average is closer to 22 million boxes.

The last time the Northwest cherry crop estimate fell below 14 million boxes was in 2008, when the industry had less acreage.

Crop estimates by region are 104,500 tons for Washington, 29,200 tons for Oregon, 2,000 tons for Idaho, 800 tons for Montana and 300 tons for Utah.

Though the 2022 crop is smaller than average, that’s not necessarily bad news for growers. Experts predict strong consumer demand and high farm-gate prices.

Industry leaders also forecast high-quality cherries this year, because fewer cherries per tree will likely mean cherries that survived the storm can grow larger and sweeter with less competition for resources.

“It’s disappointing to see a reduction in the crop, but I think that should be offset by some consistent supply once production gets rolling and the expectation of good quality,” said DeVaney.

Growers at the Northwest Cherry Growers’ five-state meeting in Richland, Wash.,



Washington State Fruit Commission  
**Northwest cherry growers expect a smaller-than-average 2022 crop after the mid-April snowstorm slowed pollination and damaged some blossoms.**

this month predicted harvest will begin between June 8 and 10, depending on the microclimate, elevation and variety.

Growers say they hope the weather will cooperate this summer, with no unexpected heat waves or other freak events. Last summer’s triple-digit heat wave was devastating for the industry. Cherry growers in 2021 lost 20% of their crop, saw huge volumes of cherries sunburned or otherwise heat-damaged and faced rattled markets.

Even if 2022 is a good crop year, however, DeVaney said cherry growers will face other challenges, including rising costs for labor and inputs. A smaller crop doesn’t mean less labor, he said. It might mean even more work, as pickers may have to hunt around more carefully for cherries to pick and may need to thin by hand this year rather than by machine.

## Oregon gears up to combat influx of grasshoppers, Mormon crickets

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**  
Capital Press

Surveys are underway on rangeland across Eastern Oregon for grasshoppers and Mormon crickets after last summer’s outbreak, which was one of the worst in 50 years.

Grasshopper outbreaks often follow or coincide with drought years as low rainfall and warm spring weather create ideal conditions for egg hatches and the survival of small nymphs, according to the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

Last summer was a prime example, with ODA reporting a record 10 million acres sustained economically damaging levels of infestation on farms and ranches in 18 counties. About 40% of the damage was in Harney and Malheur counties in southeast Oregon.

In response, state lawmakers approved a one-time \$5 million allocation for grasshopper and Mormon cricket suppression, including \$803,207 for expanded surveys on public and private land and \$4.19 million for treatments under a cost-sharing program administered by ODA.

Todd Adams, survey coordinator for ODA’s Eastern Oregon Field Office in Hermiston, said the agency is starting to receive reports of grasshoppers hatching, including at higher elevations near Jordan Valley along

the Oregon-Idaho border.

“We are expecting to see a similar type of year (to 2021),” Adams said.

Grasshoppers are voracious eaters, and having eight or more per square yard is considered enough to cause economic damage on rangeland.

According to ODA, 15 to 20 grasshoppers per square yard spread out over a 40-acre field of alfalfa will eat 1 ton of hay per day, and seven grasshoppers per square yard over 10 acres can eat the equivalent of one cow feeding throughout the season.

“In Jordan Valley, the only thing left was sagebrush,” Adams said of last

year’s outbreak.

While Oregon has 100 species of native grasshoppers, only about a dozen of them have the potential to create pest outbreaks, Adams said. He highlighted a few species, including *Camnula pellicuda*, or the clearwinged grasshopper, and *Aulocara elliotti*, or the big-headed grasshopper.

Oregon also has several populations of Mormon crickets: near Arlington along the Columbia River, Jordan Valley, Enterprise in Wallowa County and a newer population near McDermitt along the Oregon-Nevada border.

Mormon crickets can cause similar damage to

crops and forage.

They are not crickets, but flightless katydids that move together in swarms. The population in Arlington has been at outbreak level since 2017.

To control grasshoppers and Mormon crickets, Adams said diflubenzuron, a growth-inhibiting pesticide, is used. It affects the insects’ molting when they shed their exoskeleton.

Diflubenzuron does not kill adult insects and must be sprayed when they are still in their nymphal stages.

Adams said it is critical for ranchers to look for signs of grasshopper activity so ODA can survey their pastures and prescribe a treatment plan.

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