

Drought taking toll on yields, livestock numbers

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

More than 60% of the West, Southwest and Central Plains is in severe drought or worse, reducing crop yields and livestock herds.

A third survey by the American Farm Bureau Federation to assess the impacts of drought in 17 states in the western half of the U.S. illustrates the continued toll of the unrelenting drought.

In the crop sector, 74% of respondents rated a reduction in harvest yields due to drought as prevalent or higher in their area, and 42% rated the intention to switch planned crops for the growing season as prevalent or higher, accord-

ing to the Farm Bureau survey.

Some 37% reported tilling under crops because of drought, and 33% reported destroying and removing orchard trees and other multiyear crops as prevalent or higher. The latter percentage jumped to 50% in California and 40% in Arizona.

“Producers who experienced significant water usage curtailments last year may have been able to hold on, but ongoing extreme conditions have compelled some of them to make the tough decision to till under or destroy multiyear crops this time around,” said Daniel Munch, author of the report.

Respondents expected average crop yields to be down 38% this year, with the biggest drop expected

in Texas, down 68%.

“The overwhelming majority of fruits, tree nuts and vegetables are sourced from drought-stricken states where farmers are feeling forced to fallow land and destroy orchards — which will likely result in American consumers paying more for these goods and either partially relying on foreign supplies or shrinking the diversity of items they buy at the store,” he said.

On the livestock side, 90% of producers reported an increase in local feed costs as prevalent or higher in their area.

“As the region provides over 70% of the nation’s hay, widespread low-quality or insufficient forage means farmers and ranchers

must look elsewhere for a smaller supply of feed at exorbitant prices, and often located a long distance from the farm or ranch,” he said.

Two-thirds of respondents reported selling off portions of their herd or flock, with average herd sizes expected to be down 36% in the surveyed region. The largest expected herd decline was reported in Texas, where it was down 50%.

“Scarce and lower-quality forage also impacts feed conversion ratios necessary to reach desired market weights. Cattle inventories have continued to decline, with the number of heifers capable of producing next year’s calf crop dropping due to increased feedlot placements,” he said.

In many western states, where the federal government owns the majority of land, drought has diminished the usable forage, with 57% of respondents reporting impaired use of public lands as prevalent or higher and 71% reporting removing animals from rangeland due to insufficient forage as prevalent or higher.

“Ranchers reliant on these lands have few or no alternative options to purchasing food elsewhere and may lose out on funds paid for grazing permits,” he said.

Of the 67% of respondents who reported reducing herd sizes in 2021, nearly 50% were further reducing their herd or flock this year.

Klamath district complies with water shutoff after feds threaten funding

Managers bemoan ‘frustrating’ year in Klamath Project

By GEORGE PAVLEN
Capital Press

KLAMATH FALLS, Ore. — After initially indicating it would defy the federal government’s order to shut off water to the Klamath Project, the Klamath Irrigation District has closed the A Canal under duress from officials threatening to withhold millions of dollars of drought assistance.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation manages the project, which includes KID and serves 170,000 acres of farmland straddling the Oregon-California border.

Only a limited allocation of water was allowed for irrigators from Upper Klamath Lake this year because of extreme drought.

On Aug. 19, Reclamation stated the project was out of water and ordered districts to immediately halt diversions. All remaining water in Upper Klamath Lake was needed to satisfy requirements for endangered salmon and sucker fish, according to the agency.

The KID Board of Directors met Aug. 22 and authorized the district’s manager,

Gene Souza, to continue operations despite the order, arguing that Reclamation had not provided a legal justification for shutting down earlier than expected.

That prompted a letter later that day from Alan Heck, acting area manager for the bureau, warning that unless KID reversed course, it would disqualify all lands served by the district from receiving \$20 million in emergency drought funding.

Such an action would not only impact KID, but also the Pine Grove Improvement District, Enterprise Irrigation District, Sunnyside Irrigation District, Malin Irrigation District, Shasta View Irrigation District, Klamath Basin Improvement District and Van Brimmer Ditch Company — along with land for almost 100 individuals who receive water via KID infrastructure.

The KID board held an emergency meeting Aug. 23 where it was decided to close the A Canal. Souza described Reclamation’s actions as “coercion” and “bully tactics.”

“Our board’s desire to do what’s right for our community put us in a really bad spot,” Souza said. “There was no good decision.”

Had aid only been threatened for KID, Souza said the district was prepared to hold



George Pavlen/Capital Press File

Water flows from Upper Klamath Lake into the A Canal, part of the Klamath Project. The canal will now be shut down.

firm. Earlier this year, KID members voted by an 83% margin to pursue water deliveries, knowing it would likely complicate their drought funding.

“When the federal government dragged in our neighbors that have done everything they’ve been asked to do ... they’re bullying them in forcing us to make decisions,” Souza said. “That’s not how the federal government is supposed to act.”

A spokesperson for Reclamation could not immediately be reached for comment.

Adaptive management

From the beginning, Reclamation vowed it would take an adaptive approach to project operations in 2022.

Under the Endangered

Species Act, the agency must also uphold protections for several species of fish, including shortnose and Lost River suckers in Upper Klamath Lake and coho salmon in the lower Klamath River.

Reclamation initially allocated 50,000 acre-feet of water for irrigators beginning April 15, just 15% of full demand.

However, officials stated that if inflows to Upper Klamath Lake exceeded expectations, they would set aside 50% of the additional water for irrigators.

That is exactly what happened. May and June brought slightly above-average precipitation to the Klamath Falls area, according to the National Weather Service. By Aug. 1, Reclamation stated

the project water supply had increased to 82,253 acre-feet while maintaining a minimum lake elevation for suckers to access critical habitat.

However, irrigation districts criticized the bureau for sending mixed messages about how much water may be available, making it difficult for farmers to plan.

Brad Kirby, manager of the Tulelake Irrigation District in Tulelake, Calif., said shutting off water now could spell disaster for some crops.

“For some crops like alfalfa, we are looking at severely reduced production,” said Kirby. “But for row crops like potatoes and onions, there is essentially no production unless you have water through the end of the irrigation season.”

Moving the goalposts

Paul Simmons, executive director of the Klamath Water Users Association, estimated that about one-third of the Project will have received zero water this year, and the rest will have received “very limited” water.

As for the Aug. 19 water shutoff, Simmons accused Reclamation of making its decision based on politics, rather than science.

The ESA requires Reclamation to consult with two other federal agencies, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Ser-

vice and National Marine Fisheries Service, to establish guidelines for protecting endangered fish. The resulting Biological Opinions, or BiOps, form the basis for how much water fish and irrigators get every year.

A current BiOp for the suckers establishes an “absolute minimum” water elevation of 4,138 feet above sea level in Upper Klamath Lake for young fish to access critical habitat and hide from predators.

As a safeguard against over-drafting, Reclamation set a buffer of 4,138.15 feet above sea level, which it later increased to 4,138.62 feet. Simmons said that amounts to nearly 45,000 acre-feet of water put off limits to irrigators.

Simmons also said the end-of-year lake elevation targeted by Reclamation is “far above any level ever claimed to be necessary for endangered sucker species.”

The Klamath Tribes sued the federal government in May, claiming any water diverted from Upper Klamath Lake for irrigation in 2022 threatens the survival of suckers during the drought.

The fish, known as C’waam and Koptu, are central to the tribes’ history and culture.

Ranchers join forces to rescue cattle from Idaho wildfire

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Ranchers in Idaho’s west central mountains are working together to move thousands of cattle out of harm’s way as a wildfire threatens them.

Lightning started the Four Corners Fire late Aug. 13. It is burning west of Cascade Reservoir. The fire was 8,208 acres and 11% contained early Aug. 23.

“It’s right in the middle of us, taking in our whole range area up there,” rancher Marlin Wolfe said. “We are mainly just trying to move cows that could be in danger, which is kind of hard because they are on all four sides of it.”

He, his son and his father have about 500 cow-calf pairs on a grazing allotment. Fire growth in any direction could threaten them.

They euthanized one burned animal Aug. 22 and another earlier.

“The south side of the fire is where it’s most dangerous now,” Wolfe said. Containment was lowest on that side and winds were pushing against it.

The ranchers plan to push animals to safer ground.

Wolfe said a total of about 2,100 cow-calf pairs graze the allotment. Most are north of the fire, “but if we get a bad wind change, that could affect all the cattle.”

“We appreciate the sup-

port we’ve had, and people volunteering to help,” he said. “And hopefully this just doesn’t get worse.”

Simplot Land & Livestock also has 450-500 cows on the allotment, which the Forest Service administers.

Tom Basabe, the company’s president, said ranchers are working to move cows regardless of who owns them.

“Neighbors have cows with us and ours are with them,” he said. “We’ll get animals out of the way, and when it’s all said and done sort everything up.”

“We’ll lose some in something like this,” Basabe said. “You hope it’s not too many. But we’ll lose some.”



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