



Nathan Howard/AP Photo

The lake bed of the Wickiup Reservoir near La Pine in September.

Drought to worsen in Oregon this year

By GILLIAN FLACCUS
Associated Press

PORTLAND — Climate scientists in the Pacific Northwest warned Thursday that much of Oregon and parts of Idaho can expect even tougher drought conditions this summer than in the previous two years, which already featured dwindling reservoirs, explosive wildfires and deep cuts to agricultural irrigation.

At a news conference hosted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, water and climate experts from Oregon, Washington and Idaho said parts of the region should prepare now for severe drought, wildfires and record-low stream flows that will hurt salmon and other fragile species.

Drought covers 74% of the Pacific Northwest and nearly 20% is in extreme or exceptional drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. An unusual ridge of high pressure off the West Coast scuttled storms in January and February that the region normally counts on to replenish water levels and build up a snowpack that feeds streams and rivers in later months, the experts said.

“This year we’re doing quite a bit worse than we were last year at this time, so one of the points is to make everyone aware that we’re going into some tough times in Oregon this summer,” said Larry O’Neill, Oregon’s state climatologist. “Right now, we’re very worried about this region, about the adversity of impacts we’re going to experience this year.”

The predictions are in line with dire warnings about climate change-induced drought and extreme heat across the American West.

A 22-year megadrought deepened so much last year that the broader region is now in the driest spell in at least 1,200 years — a worst-case climate change scenario playing out in real time, a study found last month. The study calculated that 42% of this megadrought can be attributed to human-caused climate change.

In the Pacific Northwest, the worst impacts from the drought this summer will be felt in

Oregon, which missed out on critical winter storms that would normally moisten central and southern Oregon and southern Idaho. Scientists are debating the cause of the shift in the weather pattern and some believe a warming northern Pacific Ocean could be part of the cause, said O’Neill.

“Climate change may be changing this storm track, but there is yet no consensus on how it is affecting the Pacific Northwest,” he said.

The National Interagency Fire Center recently designated all of central Oregon as “above normal” for fire danger starting in May — one of the earliest starts of fire season in the state ever. Most of central and Eastern Oregon is in exceptional or extreme drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor, and parts of eastern Washington and western and southern Idaho are in severe drought.

Seven counties in central Oregon are experiencing the driest two-year period since the start of record-keeping 127 years ago. Overall, Oregon is experiencing its third-driest two-year period since 1895, the experts said.

Most reservoirs in Oregon are 10% to 30% lower than where they were at this time last year and some are at historic lows, signaling serious problems for irrigators who rely on them to water their crops.

Southern Idaho is also experiencing severe drought and a major reservoir in the Boise Basin has below average water supply, said David Hoekema of the Idaho Department of Water Resources.

“It takes more than just an average year to recover and it doesn’t appear that we’re going to have an average year,” he said. “At this point, we expect southern Idaho to continue in drought ... and we could also see drought intensify.”

Some of Oregon’s driest areas are already running into trouble.

After a water crisis last summer that left dozens of homes with no water, more domestic wells in southern Oregon’s Klamath Basin are running dry. State water monitors have measured a troubling drop in the

underground aquifer that wasn’t replenished by winter precipitation, said Ivan Gall, field services division administrator for the Oregon Water Resources Department.

His agency has received complaints of 16 domestic wells that have run dry since Jan. 1 and is scrambling to figure out how many more wells might go dry this summer in a cascading crisis, he said. Farming season in the agricultural powerhouse began Tuesday.

Last summer, farmers and ranchers in the basin didn’t receive any water from a massive federally owned irrigation project because of drought conditions and irrigators

instead pumped much more water than usual from the underground aquifer to stay afloat, Gall said.

The tension over water gained national attention when, for a brief period, anti-government activists camped out at the irrigation canal and threatened to open the water valves in violation of federal law.

“We’re going to start this year’s pumping season 10 feet lower than we did last season, which is a problem,” said Gall, who is already fielding calls from worried water users. “I think it’s going to be another rough water year in the Klamath Basin.”

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