

DROUGHT: Below-normal precipitation through May, June forecasted

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for water to trickle down into streams and rivers as the weather gets warmer. However, snowpack across the Umatilla and Walla Walla basins is already down to just 1 percent of normal levels.

That puts the onus of filling waterways almost entirely on spring rains, which simply haven't kept up. The National Weather Service in Pendleton reports .28 inches of rain in April, well short of the monthly average of 1.03 inches. The forecast, meanwhile, calls for near- to below-normal precipitation through May and June.

Mike Ladd, region manager for the Water Resources Department, said it would take torrential rains to make up for deficits seen on the Umatilla River. Water managers started releasing flows from McKay Reservoir — which is already just 79 percent full — on April 21, which is about two weeks ahead of schedule.

“That’s going to stretch water supplies pretty thin for those who depend on McKay,” Ladd said.

The only major irrigation district that depends on McKay is Westland Irrigation District in Echo, Ladd said. Other districts, such as Stanfield, have arranged to leave their water right in the reservoir in exchange for pumping out of the Columbia River when the Umatilla River drops below a certain level — established at 250 cubic feet per second.

Ray Kopacz, manager of the Stanfield Irrigation District, said they had only 15 days to divert water from the Umatilla before switching over to the Columbia. Usually they have 50-60 days before it gets to that point, he said.

“We’ve already sealed our canals off,” Kopacz said. “There are some districts in the area that will really be hurting.”

Farmers aren’t the only ones feeling the effect of drought. Spring salmon returns into the Umatilla are also under stress, as the lower-than-usual flows lead to high water temperatures that can slow down or even kill the fish.

On Sunday, the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife and Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation began trucking spring chinook from Three Mile Falls Dam near Hermiston to spawning areas upriver. That usually until later in June toward the end of the run, said Bill Duke, district fish biologist for ODFW.

As with irrigators, the trigger point for moving salmon comes when the river reaches 250 cfs through Pendleton. The goal is to get them to their spawning grounds before they become trapped by physical or temperature barriers, Duke said.

“It’s shallow, it’s bedrock and it heats up,” he said. “That’s what we’re trying to get the fish around.”

In a normal year, Duke said they see about 50 percent mortality of spring chinook in the river before spawning begins in September. If the weather remains hot and dry, this year’s survival could be even lower, he said.

“Long-range forecasts and drought forecasts really aren’t giving us a lot of hope for increased flows,” Duke said.

Before the governor can sign off on a drought emergency, the Drought Council and Water Availability Committee will review the county’s request at their next meeting May 14 in Salem. Givens said he will push for the commissioners to act quickly.

“Drought is here. We know it. It has to be dealt with,” Givens said. “We have the facts in front of us, and we need to get this done.”

Contact George Plaven at gplaven@eastoregonian.com or 541-564-4547.

BIRDS: Big concern is the spread of insects and disease

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Monday, though, there was no signs of eggs or hatchings in the nests the crews were removing.

The swallows tend to build only on the south facing walls of the prison, which gets plenty of sunlight. But that side of the prison also houses inmate recreational yards, several gardens and lots of walkways. Inmates and staff outdoors are under a constant threat of bird poop. Corrections officer Bradley Olson oversaw the inmates knocking down the nests and said he was “dive bombed” twice.

Jackie Peck, assistant to the prison superintendent, said the big concern, though, is about the spread of insects and disease from the birds. Carey said it can cost the prison \$600-\$700 to have professionals fumigate prison cells from bugs that come off of birds. He said the prison spent about \$3,500 last year for that.

Suzanne Anderson is a biologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, La Grande. She said she visited the prison last year to observe how it deals with the swallows and felt comfortable with the prison’s process.

“It was very obvious to me they clearly understood their legal obligation under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act,” she said. “I did not get the sense they were pushing those limits.”

She said EOCI any day now should receive her letter regarding the swallow removal program. She said the letter was to affirm the prison continue to follow what is has been doing for the past five years.

Anderson also said in her visit

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— Suzanne Anderson, biologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, La Grande

last year she learned the spraying discouraged some of the birds, so is seems to be working. But she disputed that insects would migrate from the birds to inmate cells.

She checked with some migratory bird experts in Portland, she said, who told her there are bugs that infest

swallows and swifts, but those bugs would not switch to human hosts.

“There’s no way the bird bug would infest humans or their belongings,” Anderson said. “They wouldn’t survive. They’re not the right hosts.”

The south side prison walls, though, seems to be the right host for the birds. Anderson speculated the swallows like the warmth of the sun and the heat it would provide for their eggs, while also placing their nests where they can have some shade.

Carey said the front or sides of the prison are open to the birds, but they just do not seem interested in moving there.

Contact Phil Wright at pwright@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0833.



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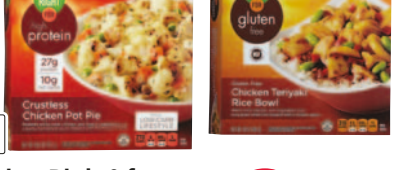
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