FISH: Biologists are experiencing similar problems in the Grande Ronde River

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spawners left over despite the drought and what he said was a robust fishery.

“It’s a challenging year, but we’ll still get by,” James said. “We just hope this doesn’t become the norm.”

The problem isn’t limited to salmon. Steelhead, trout and carp all rely on colder water to thrive. When flows drop and temperatures increase, it lowers the amount of oxygen and habitat for the species and saps their energy.

The key is mountain snowpack, which typically melts slowly through spring and gradually recharges rivers heading into the dog days of summer. Snowpack in the Umatilla Basin was just 50-60 percent of normal, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The same report predicted the Umatilla River would flow at just 38 percent of its normal volume between June and September.

Mike Ladd, region manager for the Oregon Water Resources Department in Pendleton, said they are still releasing water from McKay Reservoir for irrigators, though farmers can expect less than a full season’s worth of water available to them.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

A dead carp on the shore of McKay Reservoir on Wednesday south of Pendleton. Developing drought conditions are causing fish die-offs all over Eastern Oregon.

Water releases for fish will begin around September in time for the fall chinook, coho and steelhead runs, which are prioritized by ODFW and the CTUIR.

“Fish managers look at the pool water they have, and my understanding is the lower priority is on summer flows,” Ladd said.

Fish biologists are experiencing similar problems in the Grande Ronde River and its tributaries. Jeff Yanke, district biologist in Enterprise, said they have heard reports from river guides and the general public about finding dead trout, suckers and non-game species.

The department is preparing to check pre-spawn salmon mortality in the upper Grande Ronde and Imnaha rivers, Yanke said. Flows in the Grande Ronde are running at 500 cubic feet per second in some areas, compared to the usual 3,000 cfs.

Yanke said the conditions are unprecedented in his career.

“We’ve seen low-flow years like this, but this is the earliest we’ve encountered such conditions,” Yanke said. “We have a few more months to deal with this, unless the weather changes dramatically.”

ODFW is taking proactive measures to protect future salmon runs, he said, and collecting all broodstock for hatcheries early.

“It’s still too early to tell, but if we have a lot of pre-spawn and incubation mortality, that could be pretty bad for the persistence of our salmon populations up here,” he said.

Trout originally set to be released into stock ponds around Enterprise will also be sent to Wallowa Lake instead, since the water there is deeper, cooler and cleaner.

Fish tend to go off the bite anyway when it gets this warm, Yanke said. He advised anglers to try fishing in the morning or evenings, when the water has had a chance to cool off.

James said the tribes are closing fishing on all Umatilla River tributaries early this year to avoid putting additional stress on fish so close to spawning. Years like this are not unheard of, he said, but the region can’t afford many more like it.

“If we have several bad water years in a row, that would really impact us,” James said. “I hope this is an outlier.”

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BILL: Does not create any new mandatory spending

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Federal Forests Act isn’t as far-reaching and enjoys bipartisan support from fellow Oregon Democrats Peter DeFazio and Kurt Schrader.

“Hopefully this time, the Senate will be able to make some progress,” Walden said.

More than $461 million was spent fighting large wildfires in 2014 in Oregon and Washington. The total is already more than $17 million in 2015, including the 28,766-acre Corner Creek Fire near Dayville.

Currently, the government does not pay for wildfire suppression the same as other natural disasters. The Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management must shift money from other programs to cover the cost of firefighting during particularly intense years — a practice known as “fire-borrowing.”

The Resilient Federal Forests Act would end fire-borrowing by creating an account under the Disaster Relief Fund specifically for wildfires. The Forest Service or Department of Interior could request funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency within 30 days of exhausting their firefighting budget.

The bill does not create any new mandatory spending, and is still subject to caps set in the Budget Control Act, according to a report by the House Committee on Natural Resources.

In addition, the bill aims to increase active forest management by expediting environmental review of thinning and reforestation projects. Projects crafted by collaborative forest groups could be fast-tracked up to 15,000 acres in size, and 75 percent of areas must be reforested within five years after suffering a large fire.

The Forest Service estimates it is 30 years behind schedule keeping up with restoration in the Blue Mountains, working at its current pace. Meanwhile, over the past 30 years, Walden said northeast Oregon has lost 19 mills and 4,700 timber jobs.

“Our communities are suffering,” Walden said. “We have to fix this. We need a sustainable forest that supports healthy, sustainable economies.”

Walden didn’t have any specific estimates on the number of jobs or revenue the bill would create. He said projects would still have to follow individual forest management plans, and would not allow logging in wilderness or other roadless areas.

“If we can get the forests back into shape, (fires) won’t be as destructive,” he said.

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, has proposed his own bill for O&C timber counties which he said would double timber harvest “in a sustainable way.”

“Without a balanced approach, this House legislation risks restarting the timber wars and denying Oregon’s rural counties the lasting solution they so desperately need,” Wyden said.

A Wyden spokesman said the senator continues to look at ways to boost the Eastern Oregon timber industry to create jobs and restore forest health.

With new leadership in the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Walden said he is more optimistic than he was a year ago about getting a House-led bill passed.

“The urgency is there,” he said. “We should be able to get this done.”

BUSINESS: A few people testified against the change in policy Tuesday

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law enforcement.

“We’re not always contacting them because they owe us something,” Ward said. “We could be contacting them because we know something they would want to know, too.”

Not everyone is happy with the change.

Jack McWhinnie, who owns two rental properties in Umatilla, said he thought it was “absurd” when he got a letter telling him he needed to get a business license.

“I just can’t believe the city is stooping this low to hit the property owners,” he said.

McWhinnie said he could afford the $30 but it was the principle of the thing that bothered him. He said he felt that the city was trying to raise extra revenue and that he thought there must be something better for the staff to do than to “just start nitpicking” at landlords.

McWhinnie and a few other people testified against the change in policy at Tuesday’s city council meeting.