Flurries fly as snowpack lags

By GEORGE PLAVEN
East Oregonian

Pendleton woke up to another inch of fresh snow Wednesday morning, but snowpack throughout the Umatilla Basin still has a ways to go before catching up to normal.

Snow water equivalent — that's the amount of water contained within snow — is just 67 percent of normal for the Umatilla, Walla Walla and Willow basins, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service.

Oregon is already coming off its lowest snowpack on record for the 2015 water year, which carried over into a brutally dry summer with Gov. Kate Brown declaring drought in 25 counties. Snowpack peaked around 50-60 percent of normal in the Umatilla, Walla Walla and Willow basins and melted four to nine weeks earlier than usual.

Mountain snow is critically important for farms and fish, acting as a natural source for refilling streams and reservoirs as winter thaws. Without enough snowmelt, state and tribal fisheries managers were forced to truck spring salmon up the Umatilla River nearly two months early as water flows dropped to potentially lethal levels for the fish. Local irrigation districts also ran out of water as McKay Reservoir filled to just 82 percent of capacity.

Snowpack is faring a bit better in the Grande Ronde, Powder, Burnt and Imnaha basins at 82 percent of normal. Anthony Lakes Ski Area, near North Powder, announced the resort will officially open Saturday, with a base depth of 20 inches and 53 inches on the season.

Douglas Weber, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Pendleton, said parts of the Blue Mountains are currently reporting anywhere from 3 inches of snow depth at Emigrant Springs to 14 inches at Wolf Creek south of La Grande and 15 inches near the Oregon-Washington border. Forecasts for the next 6-10 days call for higher-than-usual precipitation, which Weber said could translate into more snow at higher elevations.

After the new year, a strong El Niño is predicted to bring warmer and drier conditions to Oregon. Julie Koeberle, hydrologist with the NRCS in Portland, said December is an important month for building snowpack, and it's still too early to tell how water supplies will shape up for 2016.

The agency will release its first water supply outlook report after January 1.

"We're hoping this year will at least be better than last year," Koeberle said. "We do still have time to catch up and have a better snowpack."

Koeberle said Oregon needs "quite a bit" of snow and precipitation to pull itself out of drought. Based on the factors, she's not sure whether Mother Nature will deliver.

McKay Reservoir south of Pendleton is just 9 percent full, which district Watermaster Greg Silbernagel said is lower than usual. The reservoir never really filled up last spring, he said, which left many irrigators dry by August and September.

Some irrigation districts shut off water early, and some ran out of water entirely, which Silbernagel said is unusual. He said everyone was able to use about 71 percent of the water they're accustomed to.

Snowpack will be key to a better season in 2016, he said.

"Precipitation fills the reservoir, but snowpack is what helps us irrigate later into the spring without using our stored water," Silbernagel said.

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Britain launches airstrikes on IS in Syria

Associated Press

AKROTIRI, Cyprus — British warplanes carried out airstrikes in Syria early Thursday, hours after Parliament voted to authorize air attacks against Islamic State group targets there.

Four Royal Air Force Tornados took off from a British air base in Akrotiri, Cyprus, shortly after the 397-223 vote by lawmakers in the House of Commons.

A Ministry of Defense spokesman told the AP the planes had conducted strikes in Syria, and details about their targets would be provided later Thursday.

He spoke on condition of anonymity in line with British policy for government spokespeople.

The RAF has been launching strikes against IS targets in Iraq since 2014. The decision to expand the campaign to Syria came after an emotional 10 1/2-hour debate in which Prime Minister David Cameron said that Britain must strike the militants in their heartland and not "sit back and wait for them to attack us."

Opponents argued that Britain's entry into Syria's crowded airspace would make little difference, and said Cameron's military plan was based on wishful thinking that overlooked the messy reality of the Syrian civil war.

Cameron has long wanted to target IS in Syria, but had been unsure of getting majority support in the House of Commons until now. He suffered an embarrassing defeat in 2013 when lawmakers rejected a motion backing attacks on the forces of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

The mood has changed following the Nov. 13 Paris attacks, claimed by IS, that killed 130 people. Both France and the U.S. have urged Britain to join their air campaign in Syria, and Cameron said Britain should not let its allies down.

AP Photo/Tim Ireland

Protesters react outside the Houses of Parliament, in London, Wednesday, Dec. 2, 2015 after UK lawmakers voted 397-223 to launch airstrikes against Islamic State group in Syria.

He said Britain was already a top target for IS attacks, and airstrikes would reduce the group's ability to plan more Paris-style carnage.

"Do we work with our allies to degrade and destroy this threat and do we go after these terrorists in their heartlands, from where they are plotting to kill British people?" he said. "Or do we sit back and wait for them to attack us?"

He said that attacking IS was not anti-Muslim but "a defense of Islam" against "women-raping, Muslim-murdering, medieval monsters."

Cameron was backed by most members of his governing Conservative Party — which holds 330 of the 650 Commons seats — as well as members of the smaller Liberal Democrat party and others.

Labour, the main opposition, was divided. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn — who represents the left wing of the party — spoke against what he called a "reckless and half-baked intervention." But more than 60 Labour lawmakers, including senior party figures, voted in support of airstrikes, a move likely to make fissures between the right and the left of the party even worse.

Labour foreign affairs spokesman Hilary Benn said Britain could not "walk by on the other side of the road" when international allies were asking for help against IS "fascists."

Britain already conducts airstrikes against IS targets in Iraq, and in August launched a drone strike that killed two British IS militants in Syria.

Russia: Turkish president benefits from IS oil trade

MOSCOW (AP) — Sharply raising the stakes in Moscow's spat with Ankara, Russia's top military brass on Wednesday accused Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his family of personally profiting from oil trade with Islamic State militants.

The bluntly-worded accusations follow Turkey's downing of a Russian warplane at the Syrian border last week, the first time a NATO member shot down a Russian aircraft in more than half a century. The fierce personal attack on Erdogan reflects the Kremlin's anger and signals that Russia-Turkey tensions will likely continue to escalate.

The Russian Defense Ministry invited dozens of foreign military attaches and hundreds of journalists to produce what they said were satellite and aerial images of thousands of oil trucks streaming from the IS-controlled deposits in Syria and Iraq into Turkish sea ports and refineries.

"The main customer for this oil stolen from Syria and Iraq is Turkey," said Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov. "The top political leadership of the country, President Erdogan and his family, is involved in this criminal business."

The Turkish leader has denied Russian President Vladimir Putin's earlier claims of Turkey's involvement in oil trade with the IS, and has pledged to step down if Moscow proves its accusations.

> "Turkey has not lost its moral values as to buy oil from a terror organization."
>
> — **Recep Tayyip Erdogan,** President of Turkey

"No one has the right to make such a slander as to suggest that Turkey buys Daesh's oil. Turkey has not lost its moral values as to buy oil from a terror organization," Erdogan said in Wednesday's speech at Qatar University, using the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State group, shortly after the Russian Defense Ministry made the claims. "Those who make such slanderous claims are obliged to prove them. If they do I would not remain on the presidential seat for one minute. But those who make the claim must also give up their seat if they can't prove it."

The Russian plane's downing has badly strained the relationship between the two nations that had earlier developed close economic ties. Russia has responded by deploying long-range air defense missiles at its air base in Syria and slamming Turkey with an array of economic sanctions.

Erdogan warned Wednesday that "if Russia's disproportionate reactions continue, we will be forced to take our own measures."

Antonov, meanwhile, said that IS militants make $2 billion a year from the illegal oil trade, and he squarely put the personal blame on Erdogan.

Antonov didn't provide any specific evidence to back up the claims of personal involvement of Erdogan and his family in the oil trade with the IS.

A Russian parliament member, Vasily Likachev, told state news agency Tass that Moscow has sufficient evidence on oil sales to file a claim with the UN International Court of Justice.

U.S. State Department spokesman Mark Toner categorically rejected Russia's allegations.

"We never said oil smuggling from ISIL is not a problem," he said, using an alternative acronym for IS. But "there is no Turkish government complicity in some operation to buy illegal oil from ISIL. We just don't believe that to be true in any way, shape or form."

EOTEC: County board also voted to give $450K for moving the fair

Continued from 1A

Commissioner Larry Givens before the vote Wednesday questioned if the board should hold off until meeting with Hermiston officials. County board chairman George Murdock said he would rather act on the demands and use those as a basis for a conversation.

The county board also made other requests for changes, according to the order:

• Have the county's chief financial officer fill the county's second seat on the EOTEC board if and when it comes open.

• The commissioner that serves on the EOTEC board and the ex-officio member should be current county staff.

• EOTEC should expand its policies to account for fiscal liability and fiscal reserves. Right now, Hermiston and Umatilla County shoulder any budget shortfalls, and there is no policy to establish a rainy day fund.

• The county's capital contributions to EOTEC must not come from the general fund, which provides money for the sheriff's office and other major county functions.

• The EOTEC board needs to create a comprehensive business plan that outlines projected revenues and expenses related to operation of the facility, which includes "operating in the black within a reasonable period of time."

The county board also voted 3-0 to give $450,000 to EOTEC project. Olsen said that money comes from the fair improvement fund and the county established the fund for this purpose.

ECONOMY: Lack of affordable housing could be a signal of future problems

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McMullen said the strong revenue forecast for the current two-year budget meant lawmakers would not have to adjust their revenue expectations at this point.

"I wish the same could be said on the spending side," McMullen said.

"This report is not full of surprises, which generally means we like it," said state Rep. Phil Barnhart, D-Eugene, chair of the House Interim Committee on Revenue. Lawmakers on the state House and Senate revenue committees held a joint meeting to hear the economic and revenue forecasts and other reports.

It could still take another year for the number of jobs in Oregon to catch up to the number of workers, said senior economist Josh Lehner. Lehner and McMullen said the lack of affordable housing — particularly in the Portland metropolitan area, Hood River and Bend — and weakness in the manufacturing sector could be signals of future problems for the state's economy.

Lehner said housing affordability is now a problem "for people up and down the spectrum."

Lawmakers and the state economists spent little time discussing the less rosy outlook beyond the current two year budget. In 2017 through 2019, economist projected that general fund and lottery revenues could decrease by $47.5 million.

Gov. Kate Brown said in a press release that she will continue to monitor the revenue outlook.

"The forecast is more than a number, it directly correlates to state government's ability to support the health of our schools, resiliency of our communities, and growth of our businesses large and small," Brown said. "While the forecast is stable through this biennium, I am watching carefully to make sure we are able to respond nimbly and appropriately should the landscape change."

LAND: Brown, Hill voted against lease

Continued from 1A

"bursting at the seams" on the four acres it is currently renting from Marshall. Perrenaud was unsure if Horizon intended to vacate Marshall's land after signing the lease with the city.

Through Queen B, Horizon will pay the city $1,825 per month to lease the land and make $130,000 worth of improvements to the property over the life of the 12-year contract.

Additionally, Horizon agreed to pay an additional $325 a month in lieu of a property tax since the storage area is on public land.

Besides generating city revenue and improving the piece of property, Perrenaud said Horizon benefits Pendleton by bringing in drivers that patronize local restaurants, gas stations, hotels and repair shops.

In explaining his side of the issue, Marshall said the public benefits didn't outweigh the damage it would inflict on private businesses.

"I hear a lot of concern about, 'Maybe Marshall's charging too much,'" he said. "That should not be a concern of the council and that should not have any bearing on the decisions that you make."

Marshall said the terms of the lease between the city and Horizon will allow the transport company to offer substantially lower rates to his remaining tenants.

"These transport companies are currently paying me 2.29 cents (per square foot) a month for their land lease," he said. "The city is going to lease their land for 6 cents per square foot a year. That's quite a differential."

Councilor Al Plute compared Marshall's situation to the benefits the city gave to a private developer to build the Pendleton Heights housing development.

Although Pendleton Heights is in direct competition with apartments Plute owns downtown, he said he supported the move because it was in the best interest of Pendleton.

Although Marshall's plight engendered some sympathy, the council voted 6-2 to approve the lease, with councilors Neil Brown and Jane Hill voting against.

Brown indicated earlier in the meeting that he thought it would be a poor decision to move forward with the deal without getting more time to review the revised lease.

Councilor Tom Young, who works as a finance manager for Keystone, said he has no direct dealings with RV transport or storage companies and felt there was no conflict of interest that would prevent him from voting.

Other issues discussed during the meeting include:

• The council approved a set of leases with OzCorp 3 LLC for use of land and buildings at 1120 Airport Road and 4400 N.W. A Ave. The company will extend their lease through 2045. The annual rent will equal 13 percent of fair market value of the buildings and the land.

The council voted 7-1 to approve the lease, with Plute voting against. Plute preferred staff negotiate higher lease terms.

• The council unanimously approved the appointment of three new members to the air quality commission.

National Weather Service meteorologist Rachel Cobb, Umatilla County Public Health Director Meghan DeBolt and city mechanic Roy Jones were the appointees.

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