

Farmers, ranchers fear drought after parched March

Mountain snowpacks are above average, but a dry spring could affect water supply, crop yields

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Mud is a symbol of spring in Northeast Oregon nearly as reliable as the bright yellow buttercup and the soft green of a wheat field.

But Wes Morgan isn't seeing much mud this spring.

Plenty of snow, in places.

And in others, clouds of dust roiling behind his rig when he drives an unpaved road.

But the mucky sludge that clogs truck tires and spatters windshields during the transition from winter to summer has been conspicuous in 2021 by its absence, said Morgan, who manages the Burnt River Irrigation District in southern Baker County.

The contrast between the mountains, where the snow still lay deep the first week of April, and the already arid lowlands, was much more distinct than usual for the season, Morgan said.

"It's a strange spring we've had," he said on April 5.

The situation is promising in one respect.

With the snowpack above average in most parts of the region as April began, irrigation water supplies from some reservoirs should be good this summer, Morgan said.

The reservoir he manages — Unity — was at 82% of capacity in early April, and Morgan was preparing to release more water from the reservoir to make room for the melting snow that will flow in over the next couple months.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian File

An irrigation line waters fields along Lorenzen Road in rural Umatilla County on Friday, July 17, 2020.

***"IF A RAINSTORM KEEPS ME OUT OF THE FIELDS,
I'M OK WITH THAT."***

— Mark Ward, Farmer

The snowpack is especially prodigious in the northern Blue Mountains, where the water content in the snow at High Ridge, near Tollgate, was 70% above average the first week of April.

But those dust clouds have Morgan worried.

He worries about the owners of rangelands and pastures that don't have access to water stored in reservoirs such as Unity.

He worries about drought.

The continuation of drought, to be specific.

According to the U.S. Drought Monitor Index, as of the first week of April a drought that started last summer persists in much of Baker

County, with conditions ranging from moderate to severe in much of the central part of the county, with a roughly oval-shaped zone of extreme drought in part of the county that includes Baker Valley.

The situation prompted the Baker County Board of Commissioners on April 7 to declare a drought disaster in the county and to ask Gov. Kate Brown as well as U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to follow suit.

State and federal drought declarations could make county farmers and ranchers eligible for financial aid, and give state water regulators more flexibility in allocating water this summer.

Elsewhere in the region, the southern part of Union County was in either moderate drought or rated as abnormally dry, while the northern part of the county, along with all of Wallowa County and the eastern part of Umatilla County, are rated as normal.

A compressed winter

Mark Bennett, a Baker County commissioner who also owns a cattle ranch in the southern part of the county, like Morgan has watched, with similar trepidation, as clouds of dust billowed behind his pickup truck early this spring.

Bennett attributes this arid predicament to a couple of factors.

First, and most obviously, is the 2020 drought. Like another scourge — the COVID-19 pandemic — the drought has lingered into 2021 in Baker County.

But Bennett said the rapid shift from damp, wintry conditions to dusty soil more typical of August than of April also reflects the nature of the past winter.

Most notably, that much of the winter's chilly power was packed into the middle of February.

The largest share of the season's snow in the valleys — especially in the Columbia Basin — fell from Feb. 9-18, when an onslaught of arctic air pushed south from Canada.

March was tranquil by contrast.

Also much drier than average.

The Eastern Oregon Regional Airport in Pendleton, for instance, recorded just 0.32 of an inch of precipitation during the month, one inch below average.

The Baker City Airport's March total was a paltry 0.14 of an inch, less than one-quarter of average.

The La Grande Airport was damp by comparison, but even its March total of 1.15 inches was almost a third of an inch below average.

Bennett said that once the valley snow had melted after the arctic outbreak in February, winter was all but over.

"Once the frost went out of the ground, it just became dry," he said.

Morgan's rising reservoir is no consolation for Bennett, either — the ranch he and his wife, Patti, own is outside the irrigation district and doesn't get any water from Unity Reservoir.

"Those of us who depend on non-storage water, it'll be a tough year," Bennett said.

But he quickly amends that unequivocal prediction.

The potential savior, as always for farmers and ranchers who toil in the considerable rain shadow cast by the Cascade Mountains, is spring rain.

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