

Wheat growers worried about lack of moisture

Snowstorms in February added moisture to the soil, but rain this spring will be crucial to 2021 yields

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PENDLETON — There is a common sentiment held among people whose lives revolve around the wheat industry — the hope that the spring rains will come.

Industry experts in Eastern Oregon say that conditions heading into the 2021 growing season are seeming grim after months of relatively dry weather.

“My biggest concern as I look out is how much rain is going to fall from the sky for our wheat producers,” said Amanda Hoey, the chief executive officer of the Oregon Wheat Commission and Oregon Wheat Growers League.

Conditions were mild in early winter in Umatilla and Morrow counties, but the snowpack that came with storms in February brought much-needed precipitation that stored water in the soil and improved yield potential for dryland wheat, experts say.

“With the ground not being frozen, just about all that water went in the soil,” Don Wysocki, a soil scientist for Oregon State University based in Umatilla County, said of the February storm that brought more than a foot and a half of snow to Pendleton. “It was stored for this year’s crop. That was really beneficial.”

But the “critical period” is from now through June, Hoey said, and additional moisture in the coming weeks will be essential for a strong crop.

“It’s kind of the same thing we had last year when we were look-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

The Fulton grain elevator rises from the fields in rural Umatilla County on Thursday, March 4, 2021.

ing at, ‘Are we going to have a crop or are we not going to have a crop?’ ” Hoey said. “The farmer’s life is definitely dependent upon what falls from the sky.”

Prices per bushel of wheat out

been higher than last year.

“We’ve had over this past year a pretty strong market in sales, particularly for the soft white wheat class,” Hoey said. “We’re seeing a couple of new customer countries

internationally, Hoey said.

Regardless, the wheat industry in Eastern Oregon will still pivot around weather conditions, experts say.

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of the region are showing a “strong bid” at the current rate of around \$6.50 per bushel delivered from the McNary Dam river terminal, according to Jason Middleton, the regional manager for United Grain Corporation.

“With prices where they are, guys will be able to make some money this year if there’s some decent yield,” said Middleton, who, like Hoey, said spring rainfall will be a crucial factor.

Hoey said that sales have so far

and destinations come into that crop size.”

Middleton and Hoey said the wheat economy has recently benefited from new trade agreements allowing the export of wheat to places such as China, which increased demand. Hoey said China, the world’s most populous country, is now the second-ranked destination for the national export of soft-white wheat.

Between 85% and 90% of the wheat grown in Oregon is exported

other people do well,” Wysocki said. “It’s a connected economy.”

Larry Lutchter, an extension agronomist for Oregon State University based in Morrow County, noted that farmers in Eastern Oregon rely on a “fallow year” — a resting period where wheat is not grown on certain fields.

The fallow period is “necessary for the storage of winter precipitation and it improves the health and nutrient-supplying power of our valuable soil

resource,” Lutchter said.

But Lutchter said dry conditions from spring through fall 2020, as well as the mild winter of 2020-21 and the “almost non-existent” rain in March 2021, have made current yields poor and the outlook uncertain.

Rainfall during March at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport in Pendleton was just 0.32 of an inch — one inch below average for the month.

Lutchter added that the lack of water “applies to all of Morrow County, the western half of Umatilla County, and much of Gilliam and Sherman County.”

That includes some of Oregon’s most productive wheat-growing areas.

Wysocki said he expects the eastern portion of Umatilla County, particularly near the foothills of the Blue Mountains, to fare better than the western half of the county, where there is typically less rainfall and the soil is shallower.

“They are the most subject to drought issues,” Wysocki said of the western portion of the county, which he said will typically see about six inches less precipitation than the east each year. “The thickness of the soil is shallow. They don’t hold much and they don’t get much.”

Wysocki said that “normal amounts” of precipitation and “average or less than average temperatures” will be essential for a strong crop, because the heat will soak up the water stored away in the soil.

“If May turns around and it’s cool and wet and we get plenty of rain through the whole region, that’ll change the scenario,” Wysocki said. “But from the reading I’ve done on expected weather conditions, it’s not expected we’re going to have a really wet spring. Is the weatherman always right? No. But the outlook isn’t all that great.”