

Wheat: West Umatilla County in extreme drought

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crop, with sparse patches of harvestable wheat among big swaths of nothing.

"It's been dry from day one," said Rauch, whose family built his farm back in 1918. It used to be called Poverty Flat, he said. "We're coming off a dry year last year. And this year's been even worse. We've only had two events — some snow in February and some rain back in November. And that's been it. It hasn't been fun."

Rauch said local farmers over the age of 55 remember the dry spell of 1977 as one of the worst the region has faced. But this year seems worse to Rauch. The ongoing drought, declining crop conditions and spiking prices are placing Rauch in a bind with contracts he has yet to fill.

"You may have to go into the market, with how short you are, and buy even more expensive wheat to fill what you thought were good prices, which are not that great now," he said.

Record-breaking drought conditions have consumed much of Eastern Oregon. Wheat industry experts say meager precipitation stretching back through the spring of 2020, coupled with high overall temperatures, have all but assured a challenging year for farmers.

"It's an exceptionally dry year," said Larry Lutchter, an extension agronomist for Oregon State University based out of Morrow County, adding, "It's too late for most of the wheat in Morrow County."

Luther said the crop-year precipitation in Morrow County ranges from roughly 4 to 6 inches — about half of the region's long-term average. And a late-season rain would do little to help now, he said.

"Most folks are disappointed that our yield potential will be much less than average," Lutchter said.

The drought stretches across Eastern Oregon. Conditions in Umatilla County range from extreme drought in the west to moder-



A weathervane sits on the side of a combine harvester as it loads a bankout wagon on Wednesday, June 23, 2021, at Starvation Farms near Lexington.

Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

ate in the east, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. More than three-fourths of Morrow County is experiencing extreme drought.

"For us, things aren't as bad as other drier areas," said Emery Gentry, Umatilla County president of the

in Pendleton.

A May 2021 climate summary from the National Weather Service in Pendleton said many stations throughout Northeastern Oregon and Southeastern Washington reported conditions from March through

Wheat Growers League and Oregon Wheat Commission. "The crop conditions have certainly declined. We have a lot of wheat in fair condition, very little that's in good or excellent condition."

Hoey said farmers statewide are voicing concerns over the conditions.

"I don't think anybody is expecting to see anything that is above average, for certain," she said. "Average would be ambitious. We're probably looking at below-average overall."

But average wheat prices have remained strong throughout the year, experts say, ranging from about \$7 to more than \$8 per bushel. Hoey said new international trade agreements with places such as China have bolstered the sale of soft white wheat this year, as the majority of wheat grown in Oregon is exported internationally.

But a meager crop this year will impact the region's economy regardless, Hoey added.

"As an industry, agriculture has a huge ripple effect down the supply chain," she said. "You need to have a healthy agriculture industry to have a healthy economy overall. We're resilient. I will say, it will be an extraordinarily tough year with what we have out there."

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— Larry Lutchter, extension agronomist for Oregon State University

Oregon Wheat Growers League, who farms on the foothills of the Blue Mountains near Weston. "But it's definitely a poorer year for us too. Typically we rely on rains in April and May. And it's June. And the amount of rain we got is just dismal compared to what we would normally expect."

The month of March was the sixth driest on record in Pendleton and the second driest in Hermiston. In April, conditions hardly improved, with Pendleton reporting the seventh driest month on record and Hermiston the third driest, according to the National Weather Service

May that ranked in the top 10 driest three-month periods on record, and some stations reported the driest three-month period on record.

Gov. Kate Brown already declared a state of drought emergency in Jefferson, Deschutes, Crook, Harney, Malheur, Sherman, Wallowa, Lake, Jackson and Klamath counties. In April, Umatilla County declared a drought and asked Brown to follow suit.

"Basically, between February and now, we have not had any substantial rain in a good segment of the state," said Amanda Hoey, the chief executive officer for the Oregon

Chimp: 'We felt it was imperative to inform the state of these violations'

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enclosed patio. Brogoitti is out of view, hiding in a basement with her daughter, but her voice is evident and she directs the deputy to shoot the ape.

The deputy fired once, hitting Buck in the head, killing the 200-pound chimpanzee.

"There was no pain," Brogoitti said. "My beautiful son folded forward and was with God. There wasn't a twitch. ... He just went to be with God. It was horrible, but it had to happen."

Brogoitti said she was at her daughter's side at St. Anthony Hospital, Pendleton. She did not get into what provoked the attack, but said her daughter, 50, suffered bites on her thighs and buttocks. The plan was for her daughter to leave the hospital June 23 and live for a while at Brogoitti's home, where she will undergo physical therapy.

Brogoitti also complimented the medics who rushed her daughter to the hospital, and thanked the hospital staff for its "unbelievably wonderful" treatment of her daughter.

Sheriff's office flags residence

Brogoitti also did not get into details about how she and her late husband, John Brogoitti, acquired Buck as a baby 17 years ago, only to specify it was not to exploit the animal for financial gain. Buck, she said, never appeared on a TV show, for example.

Umatilla County Sheriff's Lt. Sterrin Ward said the sheriff's office is treating this as it would any other animal attack, referring its report to the county's public health department and the district attorney's office.

The sheriff's office on June 21 released two clips of the 911 call Brogoitti made after the attack took place and she was able to get into the basement with her daughter. Ward explained most of the 911 recording includes pauses with little information while emergency help arrived. The sheriff's office released the two clips, she said, because those segments were the most relevant to helping the public understand what happened.

Ward also said the sheriff's office had "flagged" the Brogoitti residence because of Buck. She said the sheriff's office uses such indicators so its staff can take proper precautions and be safe at certain locations.

PETA warns state

Buck also pinged the radar of the nationwide nonprofit People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Brittany Peet, the PETA Foundation's deputy general counsel for Captive Animal Law Enforcement, issued this statement on June 21 about the attack:

"PETA warned state authorities that Tamara Brogoitti had created a ticking time bomb by engaging in direct contact with a dangerous ape, and now, he is dead and a woman has been mauled because of Brogoitti's refusal to follow experts' advice and transfer Buck to an accredited sanctuary. Since long before the chimpanzee Travis ripped a woman's face off in 2009, it has been clear that attacks are inevitable so long as people continue to treat chimpanzees like Chihuahuas."

Oregon banned possession of exotic animals in 2010, with two exceptions:

- If the U.S. Department of Agriculture licensed the owner of the animal.
- If the owner has a valid Oregon exotic animal permit obtained prior to 2010.

Brogoitti fell into the



Buck Brogoitti Animal Rescue/Contributed Photo

This photo from 2015 shows Buck, the adult male chimpanzee Tamara Brogoitti cared for at her ranch near Pendleton. A Umatilla County sheriff's deputy on Sunday, June 20, 2021, shot and killed the primate after it attacked Brogoitti's adult daughter.

second category. But according to PETA, Brogoitti was violating state laws and rules and the terms of her permit for keeping Buck.

PETA on April 16 sent a letter and complaint about Brogoitti to Isaak Stapleton, director of Food Safety and Animal Health, the agency under the Oregon Department of Agriculture that issues permits for exotic animals.

PETA's complaint stated the permit the agriculture department issued to Brogoitti lists Dr. Douglas Pernikoff of Glencoe, Missouri, as the veterinarian caring for Buck. Aside from being more than 1,800 miles away from where Buck lived, Pernikoff is not licensed to practice veterinary medicine in Oregon, according to PETA.

The state agriculture department also requires cages or rooms of certain dimensions and materials to confine exotic animals. But per the complaint, social media posts show Buck would roam Brogoitti's home and other parts of the property. PETA also alleged Brogoitti misrepresented Buck's age to the agriculture department, a violation of the permit.

Debbie Metzler, associate director of PETA's Captive Animal Law Enforcement, said the organization has rescued 13 chimps from private captivity since 2013. Chimps are social animals and can be violent animals, she said. Buck, for his entire life, lacked the companionship of other chimpanzees, she said, and Brogoitti was not following the law.

"We felt it was imperative to inform the state of these violations," Metzler said.

She also said Buck attacking a person was bound to happen.

If Buck's death can serve any purpose, Metzler said, it's to bring attention to the Captive Primate Safety Act, a proposal in Congress that would prohibit the buying, selling and transporting of any live exotic wildlife.

Metzler said this act has been before Congress in the past, but it's never made it to a president's desk for a signature. Passage of the bill, she said, would prevent more horrible situations similar to Buck's.

Metzler also said no one else in the region owns a primate, but PETA is calling on all owners of primates to make arrangements to move them to facilities that can properly care for the animals.

Keeping primates, such as Buck, she said, is "basically a death sentence."

Brogoitti said she still was feeling shock from the traumatic events, but now her attention has to shift.

"The only thing I got to focus on is my daughter," she said, "and making sure she is fully recovered and properly taken care of."

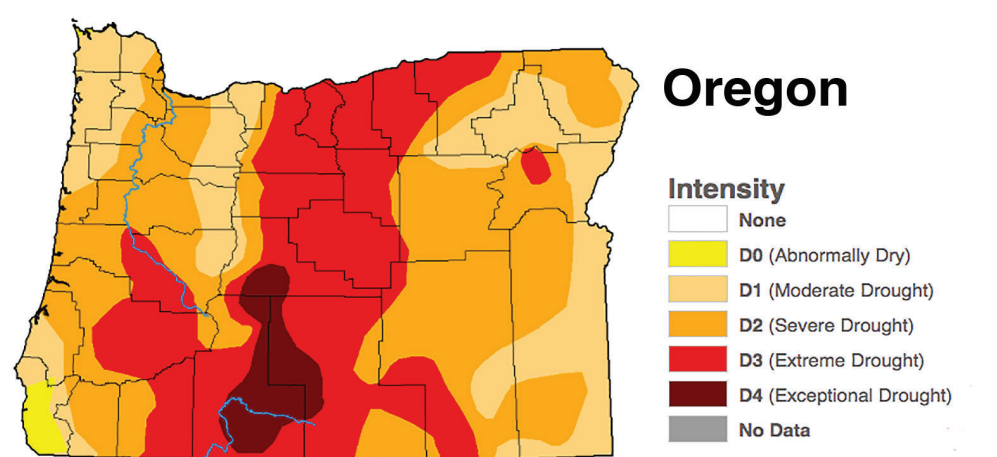
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"That's also very concerning right now for a lot of the agricultural and livestock producers here," O'Neill said. "Things are looking a little bit bleak."

Oregon is already coming off of a record fire season in 2020 during which more than 1 million acres burned, particularly in Western Oregon, where a series of post-Labor Day conflagrations fanned by strong easterly winds consumed entire towns.

Lisa Ellsworth, an assistant professor who studies fire behavior and rangeland ecology at the College of Agricultural Sciences, said Oregon is not at the point yet where fire season lasts year-round, as in California. But the trend toward higher temperatures and more severe drought across



U.S. Drought Monitor/Contributed Graphic

the West is having an impact.

"Twenty years ago, when I fought wildland fire, our seasons looked nothing like this," she said.

Erica Fleishman, director of the Oregon Climate Change Research Institute, said it is impossible to pin the trend entirely on climate change, but "the types of weather patterns we're seeing this year are consistent with what has been observed and

what is projected as climate continues to change."

"Climate change is a factor," Fleishman said. "We cannot simply pin it all on climate change, but it is a factor."

Hotter and drier weather does not always necessarily mean more fires. There must be a spark, in combination with the right conditions, for wildfire to spread.

Ellsworth said more than

80% of fires in the West are caused by humans, underscoring the need for people to be careful working and recreating outdoors.

"While we can't do a whole lot about the drought conditions we are facing right now, we can do a whole lot about the ignition sources ... managing people and managing that potential for wildfire as people are out there recreating," she said.

COVID-19:

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Commissioner George Murdock said. "And that's a false assumption. It's not. It's not over, even if Oregon opens up, it's not over here. It's going to continue."

Last week, Umatilla County reported 76 cases, 35 more than the previous week, according to county health data. That's the steepest weekly case spike the county has reported since April, after reporting declining weekly cases for five straight weeks.

"We were trending downwards, and that (case spike) keeps us solidly in that high risk unfortunately," said Fiumara. "I wish it wasn't this way. But, we're waiting for the rest of the state to carry

us across the goal line."

Fiumara said much of the county's cases are being traced back to small social gatherings but with no large outbreaks. However, he said people who have been exposed often are reluctant to cooperate with contact tracers, all but assuring cases are going unreported and making it difficult to track the spread of infection.

Fiumara and Murdock each said nearly all reported cases are coming from people who have not been vaccinated against COVID-19.

Vaccine rates continue to lag behind state

The county has lagged behind statewide vaccination rates for months. It has the third lowest vaccination rate per capita in the state, according to state health data.

Only 31.7% of residents have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, also the third lowest in Oregon, despite reporting one of the highest infection rates in the state, according to an Oregonian/OregonLive database.

"We have vaccination sites open all over the county," Murdock said. "It is not an accessibility problem. We have enough sites, and we have enough vaccine. We just don't have enough people willing to get a shot."

Murdock described the county's vaccine rate as "extremely demoralizing." He added he believes residents likely will be less inclined to get vaccinated when restrictions are lifted.

Fiumara said it's been frustrating to see people choose not to get vaccinated, as it has likely contributed to the

county remaining among the state's most stringent restrictions for longer than almost any county in Oregon.

"We knew what the outcome of that choice was going to be," Fiumara said of residents not getting vaccinated. "We were going to stay in high risk. We were going to stay in these restrictions longer."

Fiumara and Murdock each said they are glad the county's economy is primed to reopen when the state reaches 70%. But with the county's vaccination rate remaining low, they said it's possible cases could spike around the large upcoming summertime events and holidays.

"I think we'll experience cases of COVID longer than most other counties," Murdock said.