

# A drought like no other, NOAA scientist says

By DON JENKINS  
Capital Press

SALEM — The West has been so dry and so hot for so long that its current drought has no modern precedent, according to a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration meteorologist.

For the first time in 122 years of record-keeping, drought covers almost the entire Western U.S. as measured by the Palmer Drought Severity Index, said Richard Heim, a drought historian and an author of the U.S. Drought Monitor.

“It’s a very simple ‘yes,’ in terms of this drought being unprecedented,” Heim said.

The Palmer index estimates relative soil moisture based on temperature and precipitation records. Unlike the Standard Precipitation Index, which measures water supply, the Palmer index also takes into account heat-driven demand for water.

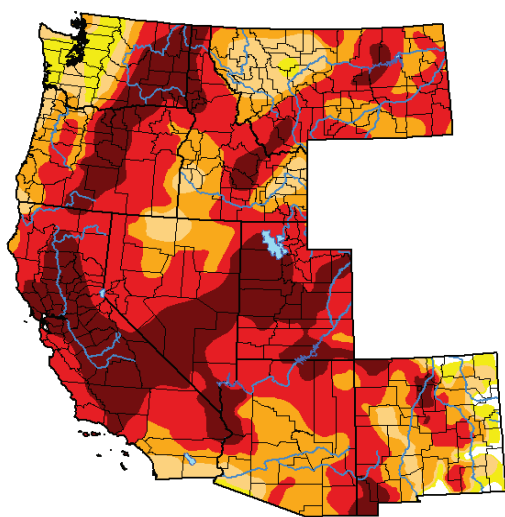
In June, about 97% of the West — Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah and Washington — was in water-deficit territory, according to the Palmer index.

Utah was never drier, while Oregon and California were at their second driest on record. Idaho and Arizona were at their third driest ever, and Nevada was at its fourth driest.

Washington was at its 10th driest, while Montana and New Mexico, where recent monsoons have brought relief, were at their 17th driest.

Oregon and Washington

## U.S. Drought Monitor West



July 27, 2021  
(Released Thursday, Jul. 29, 2021)  
Valid 8 a.m. EDT

**Intensity:**  
None  
D0 Abnormally Dry  
D1 Moderate Drought  
D2 Severe Drought  
D3 Extreme Drought  
D4 Exceptional Drought

The Drought Monitor focuses on broad-scale conditions. Local conditions may vary. For more information on the Drought Monitor, go to <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/About.aspx>

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Brad Rippey/U.S. Department of Agriculture

The U.S. Drought Monitor shows the western United States ranges from abnormally dry to exceptional drought.

state climatologists gave their qualified endorsement for calling this drought “unprecedented.”

“I’d be slightly cautious about calling it ‘unprecedented,’ but that’s probably a fair description,” Oregon State Climatologist Larry O’Neill said. “It’s borderline unprecedented, or at least among the worst.”

The cumulative effects of the West’s current drought, illustrated by low major reservoirs, gives credence to calling it unprecedented, Washington State Climatologist Nick Bond said.

“I don’t have any real quarrel with using that term,” he said.

The Drought Monitor, a partnership between NOAA and the USDA, has been mapping drought in the U.S. since 2000. The percentage

of the West in “exceptional drought,” the worst category, has never been higher. More than 95% of the nine Western states is in some stage of drought.

Heim said the combination of prolonged above-average temperatures and below-normal precipitation set this drought apart from two multiyear droughts that spanned the 1930s and 1950s.

The U.S. entered another extended dry episode in 1998, he said. The drought has eased periodically, but never really went away and reasserted itself beginning last spring, he said.

A 24-month period that ended June 30 was the driest such two-year period ever in the West, according to records dating back to 1895. The same time period was

the sixth warmest.

Other two-year dry periods, such as 1976 and 1977, were not as hot, Heim said.

“I would define this (drought) as still part of a 20-plus-year drought,” he said. “In the last year and a half, we have been on an intensifying trend.”

The drought’s depth, duration and cause varies by state, making comparisons between the current drought and past droughts imperfect.

In measuring drought, “there is no simple best way,” Bond said. “There are different flavors of drought.”

Washington’s 1977 drought was much worse judged solely by the precipitation index. About 90% of Washington was in exceptional drought in June 1977, compared to less than 1% this June.

# Survey: Oregonians are concerned about water management

By MICHAEL KOHN  
The Bulletin

PORTLAND — Seven out of 10 Oregonians are concerned about how the state’s groundwater and surface water are being managed. Most Oregonians say the answer to resolving water problems is increasing state subsidies for high-efficiency irrigation equipment.

Those are two findings in a recent survey conducted by the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center, a Portland-based nonprofit. The survey was conducted statewide in July and involved 1,464 respondents. It carries a margin of error of 1.5% to 2.6%.

Results of the survey show that while Oregonians are largely concerned about water issues, many believe that there is enough water to serve all needs and shortages are not likely to occur. These opinions are being expressed while the entire state is in some form of drought.

According to the U.S. drought monitor, more than half of the state is in extreme or exceptional drought. Coastal areas and the Willamette Valley are in moderate or severe drought.

Key findings in the survey show that a quarter of respondents are not very or not at all concerned about the management of surface and groundwater.

The survey suggests age as a factor in determining who is concerned about

water management. Around 63% of people age 18 to 44 said they are somewhat or very concerned while around 74% of those over 45 were concerned.

Concern also increased with education — 60% of those with only a high school diploma said they were concerned with the number rising to 76% for those with a college diploma.

Party affiliation also played an important role in how people felt about water management — 78% of Democrats said they were somewhat or very concerned while 61% of Republicans fell into this category.

Survey respondents had a variety of opinions about the management of groundwater by farmers and ranchers. Subsidizing water-efficient irrigation systems received the strongest support among mitigation strategies, along with increasing the state budget for groundwater research to ensure future availability. Both fell into the so-called tier-one support category for having the support of 70% or more of survey respondents, according to the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center.

“It’s notable that neither proposal involves more restrictions or limitations on agricultural water usage, but rather encourages and facilitates proactive solutions,” according to the survey. “Both proposals do, however, necessitate larger financial investment from the state.”

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