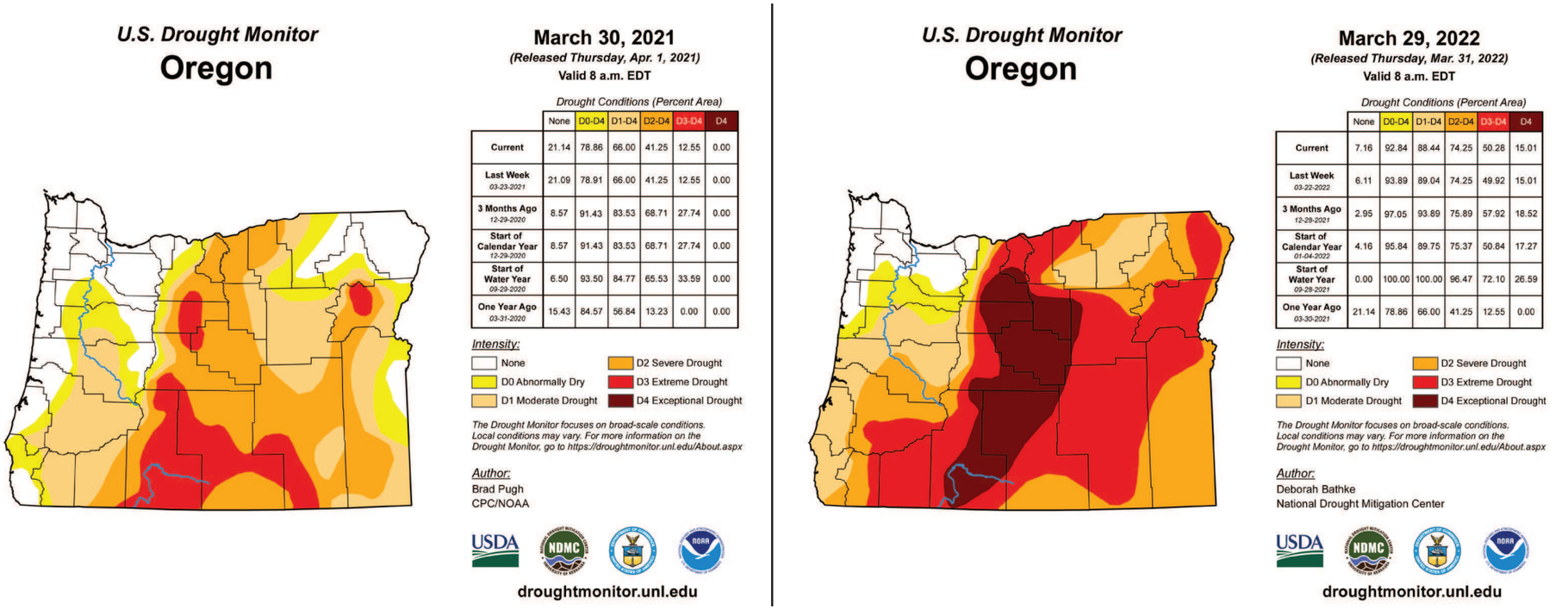

This map, left, from March 30, 2021, compared with the map from a year later, right, shows the worsening drought conditions in Northeastern Oregon.

Drought:

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Ron Rowan, who works for Beef Northwest in North Powder, a company that operates four cattle feedlots and three grow yards, agrees.

"It doesn't look good right now in a lot of areas in the Northwest," Rowan said.

About 30 miles north of Bennett, as the buzzard flies, Baker Valley farmer Mark Ward was also worried.

After a series of snowstorms in late December and early January bolstered the mountain snowpack — a vital source of irrigation water for farmers and ranchers — the rest of the winter was abnormally dry.

February was the driest on record at the Baker City Airport, where statistics date to 1943.

Just 0.01 of an inch of precipitation was measured at the airport during the month — scarcely enough to dampen the ground.

"The concern level is high," Ward said in early March. "This could be worse than last year. And last year was the worst I've ever seen."

Based on the snowpack, the prospects for 2022 are more dire than a year ago.

At the start of March 2021, the snowpack in Northeastern Oregon was about 29% above average.

A year later, it was 15% below average.

"We didn't get anything in January and February," said Ward, whose family raises potatoes, peppermint, wheat and alfalfa. "We didn't add to the snowpack."

The situation isn't completely bleak, though.

Ward said widespread rain during the fall of 2021, before the ground froze and the snow came, helped to replenish soil moisture in his family's fields.

"We're ahead of where we were last year as far as ground moisture in the fields," he said.

But that's not the case everywhere.

As Bennett's observations on his place show, the soil remains depleted of moisture in other parts of the region.

The southern part of Baker County typically is drier than the northern areas, including Baker Valley, Bennett said.

Pining for precipitation

Regardless of the geographic differences, both Bennett and Ward agree that, with the time dwindling for a major reversal in the snowpack, the much more plausible potential for improving the situation is a soggy spring.

This is hardly the farfetched wish of the desperate.

Ward and Bennett said they recall multiple years when timeline rains during the spring partially offset the negative effects of a skimpy snowpack.

Rains from April through June have the obvious benefit of nourishing crops just as they're beginning to grow.

But significant rain during spring can also allow irrigation district officials to store most of the snowmelt in reservoirs rather than doling it out to keep fields damp.

Unlike the western side of Oregon, where fall and winter are the wettest seasons, in much of Eastern Oregon the best chance for prolonged precipitation is spring.

At Baker City Airport, for instance, May is the wettest month on average, and June ranks second.

And no other month comes close to that two-month stretch.

May's average rainfall is 1.42 inches, and June's is 1.26 inches.

December ranks a distant third, with an average of .91 of an inch.

Rainfall is more evenly distributed at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport in Pendleton, with December (1.56 inches), January (1.49) and November (1.43) the three dampest months.

But May is the fifth-wettest, with an average of 1.18 inches, and April ranks seventh at 1.08 inches.

At Milton-Freewater, May is also the fifth-wettest month. March is the fourth-wettest, and April ranks sixth.

At Wallowa, May is the third-wettest month, and June ranks fifth.

Don Wysocki, a soil scientist with the Oregon State University Extension in Umatilla County, said rain this spring would be a boon for dryland farmers.

"Stands look better than the weather would justify, but we need more moisture from now to June," Wysocki said. "We need timely rains to make an average crop. Without a wet spring, it'll be another disaster like last year. Wash your car, cut your hay, whatever it takes to make it rain."

The National Weather Service doesn't hold out much hope, though, that Northeastern Oregon will get enough rain during the rest of this growing season to make up for the deficit.

"I wouldn't hang my coat on any significant improvement in the near future," said lead meteorologist Roger Cloutier at the NWS office in Pendleton during a March 28 interview. "You have to take three-month forecasts with a grain of salt, but the April, May and June outlook in Northeast Oregon is for below normal precipitation. That's from the Climate Prediction Center. We don't make (such long-term) forecasts locally."

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