

“THE CONCERN LEVEL IS HIGH. THIS COULD BE WORSE THAN LAST YEAR. AND LAST YEAR WAS THE WORST I’VE EVER SEEN.”

— Mark Ward, Baker Valley farmer



Pat Voigt delivers a load of hay to hungry cattle on his Prairie City ranch on Friday, March 11, 2022.
Bennett Hall/EO Media Group

Drought:

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March certainly didn't improve the situation in any substantial way.

Rainfall was well below average for the third straight month at the Baker City Airport.

Wallowa County

Drought concerns, even with the snowpack in Wallowa County below normal and coming off a dry 2021, are tempered, and there is hope the spring and summer ahead won't result in a repeat of last year.

“For me, personally, that's not terribly concerning,” said Kevin Melville with Cornerstone Farms in Wallowa County when talking about the area snowpack being about 85% of normal on March 9. “That's not what I consider bad. If I was down in the Klamath Basin I'd be a lot more concerned.”

Snow amounts being somewhat below

average aren't as big of a worry largely because of the impact spring rains tend to have on the region.

Should those rains not come, then concern will be much higher.

“For us, at least in the upper valley, we're just really dependent on those rains,” Melville said. “But I do know, I've been talking to some farmers up in the Palouse, and they're concerned. Some areas are facing more of a concern.”

Dan Butterfield with Butterfield Farms, which grows dark northern spring wheat and two types of hay, had a similar sentiment.

“I would say we're a little early to tell, because March can be our biggest snow month,” he said during a March 9 interview. “If we have a decent March we'll probably be up above average. I do think the rest of the state may be in trouble.”

March didn't deliver the snow that Butterfield was hoping for, however.

The month was drier than usual, and the snowpack, as a percentage of average,

declined from the start of March to its end.

Grant County

Last summer's record-setting drought was hard on Pat Voigt, whose family has a Simmental cow-calf operation with about 650 mother cows near Prairie City.

“Personally, as a landowner, it really hit me in the pocketbook,” he said. “I had to buy 650 ton of hay last year.”

The extra feed cost him about \$100,000, Voigt said, “but that's ranching.”

To keep feed costs down, Voigt did what a lot of other cattle producers did last year: He sold off some of his herd so he'd have fewer animals to feed over the winter.

It also positions him better to weather what he fears is likely to be another dry season with less than adequate forage for his cattle.

“We only kept half the replacement heifers we normally keep. ... just in anticipation of another poor hay year,” Voigt said.

“It's going to get tough this year if

there's another drought because these basins around us are totally depleted,” he added. “Hay prices are really high right now, and I think they're going to get worse through this summer.”

Voigt, who serves as chairman of the Grant County Soil and Water Conservation District, says many of the cattle producers he talks to share his concerns about the coming year.

“I think a lot of them are (in the same boat),” he said. “When there's no spring grass, everybody's in a hurt in a hurry.”

Voigt said a good working relationship with his credit union helps him deal with the unexpected financial vagaries that inevitably come up from time to time. Last year, for instance, he was able to postpone his payments until he got his calves sold. What he won't do, he said, is take out a big loan to cover drought-related expenses.

“Like I say, that's ranching,” Voigt said. “The way we operate is whatever you make, that's what you've got to run on next year.”