

SPRING RAIN | BAKER COUNTY

Grass:

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“Last year the snow was there but it just didn’t come out,” he said. “Last year was a disaster.”

Pickard said this spring has epitomized something he learned more than 40 years ago from a couple of his mentors in the cattle business, the late Dan Warnock and Fred Phillips.

They told Pickard that, in effect, “Eastern Oregon will never let you down completely,” he said — meaning that when conditions seem dire and hopeless, the formerly stingy skies will turn generous.

Pickard said that rarely, if ever, in his more than four decades ranching here has that adage been proved more conclusively.

‘Saved our bacon’

Mark Ward pauses for a few seconds as he considers the question.

Putting into context just how dramatically conditions changed during the spring

of 2022 on his family’s fields in Baker Valley challenges his powers of description.

“It’s certainly a godsend,” said Ward, whose family grows potatoes, wheat, peppermint and alfalfa. “I haven’t seen anything as significant as this in a long time. In early April it looked worse than bleak. But it did a 180. Those rains were wonderful.”

And they were wonderful even when they were fouling up Ward’s schedule.

He likes to plant potatoes on May 1.

But this year the ground was much too muddy on that day to put spuds in the ground.

Ward said planting took place 10 days later, a delay he doesn’t begrudge due to the big jump in soil moisture the spring storms caused.

“That didn’t bother me one bit,” he said. “I’ll take the moisture over a calendar date any time.”

Ward said that moisture has revived some ailing mint fields — including one where farming is something of a spectator sport.

That’s the field just south of Hughes Lane in north Baker City, between the Baker Sports Complex to the west, and the Pow-

der River and Leo Adler Memorial Parkway to the east.

The Parkway, in particular, makes this mint crop conspicuous, since people frequently walk beside the field — what Ward laughingly refers to as “500 sidewalk farmers.”

Some of the pedestrians know him, and he said he gets an occasional assessment from a passer-by.

Ward’s educated eye tells him that the mint, which the Wards distill into potent peppermint oil each August as the flavoring for toothpaste, is thriving.

“I think it’s looking better than it has in three years,” Ward said on June 28. “It was stressed all last year” due to the lack of moisture. “I’m very happy with how the mint looks.”

Replenishing a reservoir

Ward is also pleased — somewhat pleased, anyway — when he checks on Phillips Reservoir.

That reservoir along the Powder River in Sumpter Valley, about 17 miles southwest of Baker City, supplies irrigation water to

much of Baker Valley, including some of the Ward family’s fields.

Although Phillips remains far below average, holding about 26% of its capacity at the end of June, Ward points out that the reservoir was depleted even more a year ago, at just 14% full.

There was enough this spring that everyone with water rights was able to thoroughly irrigate their ground, said Ward, who is a member of the board of directors for the Baker Valley Irrigation District, which regulates the reservoir.

He said he expects farmers and ranchers will get about the same amount of water from the reservoir as they did last year — “and we survived last year.”

Ward concedes, though, that it likely will take at least two years that combine bountiful winter snow and damp spring weather to even come close to refilling the reservoir. Phillips is much larger than other local reservoirs, with a capacity of 73,500 acre-feet compared with Thief Valley’s 13,500 and Unity’s 24,500.

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