

Commissioners still concerned over drought

Irrigation district chief not so much

By BILL BRADSHAW
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — As Wallowa County moves into warmer weather, the outlook for the drought declaration the county commissioners approved May 21 isn't getting any brighter, they said after their meeting Wednesday, June 2.

Commissioner Todd Nash said the county has a D1 drought designation, which is not nearly as severe as some neighboring counties.

"In Union and Baker counties, they've tripped into D3 in one little portion of their counties in the southern portion. They're already there," he said. "The north end of Wallowa County did not get those last rains that we got. Most of the county got nine-tenths to 2 inches and the

north end got about a tenth and they're extremely dry. We're looking at what the next weeks in the Drought Monitor might show."

The U.S. Drought Monitor daily updates the drought outlook for regions all over the country. Maps can be found at <https://drought-monitor.unl.edu>.

Nash said a 90-person board reads the Drought Monitor weekly and rotates its members "so there's a fresh set of eyes on it."

But, he said, online maps don't always tell the whole story on the ground.

"One of the things in our conversations with the USDA's Farm Service Agency is they're not equating all the cold nights we've had for grass growth. A lot of these guys have been through their pastures one time. Now we're getting to a point where it doesn't grow back anymore," he said. "I was just talking to a guy from Wallowa this morning and some

of Wallowa didn't get those rains. Now he's going out to the Divide country and it's been so cold up there he's still got snow. He said there isn't any feed."

He said he told the FSA, "You guys can read whatever map you want, but we're in a critical spot right now."

The higher the "D" rat-

ing is aware that producers in Umatilla and Morrow counties are grazing on CRP land because of the drought conditions there.

"They were in tough shape. It was just brutal dry over there," Nash said. "We're still in better condition than almost any county in the state, but it's not good (here). The guys who are

will stand up to any drought.

"We are in what I would consider to be a really lucky situation because we have a reservoir," he said, adding that an engineering firm the district contracts with is giving positive assurances.

"We're set to fill the lake by July to our maximum levels," he said.

In fact, just Wednesday, the lake showed a 2-inch increase. Butterfield said it needs to fill another 5 feet to reach its maximum level.

He agreed that many irrigators turned on the tap May 1 — the earliest allowable date — which was two to three weeks early. But he's not seeing that so abnormal.

"Last year we got 10 inches of rain and didn't irrigate too much," he said.

Butterfield said this year the district will be putting that water to use. Farmers are both irrigating from ditches that run from the lake and from pipes installed to keep water from

evaporating, making that water more efficient.

"Right now, we're using our water instead of sending it out of here muddy to the ocean," he said. "Almost every year we end up dumping a lot of water. With the fact that people have started irrigating, we may not have to dump as much."

But the commissioners remained concerned. Nash and fellow Commissioner Susan Roberts agreed there needs to be rain along with the warmer temperatures.

"It isn't the same as when you have snow and then you get rain up there to bring the snowmelt down," Roberts said.

"It's kind of double jeopardy," Nash added. "If it warmed up and then it rained at the same time, they wouldn't be pulling out of the lake for all they're worth and it'd be accumulating in the lake. I think we're going to see this thing just keep going to where we don't get caught up."

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— Todd Nash, Wallowa County commissioner

ing, the more federal funding is available. Also, regulations can be eased, such as allowing emergency grazing on Conservation Reserve Program land that is otherwise set aside to not be used agriculturally.

Nash said he's aware Wallowa County isn't in as poor shape as some Oregon counties. He said he

taking water out of Wallowa Lake are already on a rotation. It hasn't been warm enough early enough and then they started pulling out of the lake earlier than normal so it never had a chance to back up."

But Dan Butterfield, president of the Wallowa Lake Irrigation District, said he's confident the lake

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