

Drought conditions could lead to fish management changes

By RONALD BOND
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Drought conditions throughout Oregon, including in Wallowa County, could have an impact on anglers this season — especially if rain doesn't come during the early stages of summer and temperatures stay warm.

That was part of the message in an update shared recently by Kyle Bratcher, the acting district fish biologist in the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Enterprise office.

"Currently most of the state is under drought status and we're expecting low flows throughout much of the summer," Bratcher said in an email. "We're now warning of potential changes in fish management to mitigate for warm conditions and to protect vulnerable fish populations."

Bratcher, in an interview with the Chieftain Friday, June 4, said in most Wallowa County rivers, flows have been lower and pretty moderate.

"It looks like we're going to hit base flows earlier than we normally do," he said. "I think we're going to be base flows by late June to early July."

In 2020, he said, the base flow wasn't reached until almost August.

"That means the fish is spending like six weeks in hotter temperatures (last year) as opposed to 8-10 weeks," which could be the potential this year if temperatures rise, he said.

Base flow, he said, is "basically the lowest flow you see." At that point, snowmelt from the mountains has ceased and a river is no longer rising.

The biologist said that warming water temperatures

have a major impact on fish, especially if they are in hot water for too long.

"Really what happens (is) hot water holds less oxygen," he said. "Fish will tend to move into faster-flowing areas. They are burning more energy to stay in (these faster and more) oxygenated areas. It makes their immune systems a little more vulnerable, and they'll get attacked by parasites. At certain times, they'll stop feeding altogether," if the heat is too high.

Hot water could lead to actions

If the drought conditions do worsen, there are a number of steps ODFW can take at the state or local level when it comes to fish management.

Bratcher said that changes haven't been implemented in Wallowa County since 2015, which he said was a very low water year. That summer, anglers were required to stop

fishing by 2 p.m. daily.

The move, called "hoot-owl regulations," would likely be the first restriction implemented this summer if they are deemed necessary.

According to the ODFW website, some of the other options include bag limit removal, early release of fish, relocation of fish or trout stocking changes.

Actions like removing the bag limit would only be implemented if there was an increased likelihood of fish dying in the water. He said, though, there is likely just one location that could happen in Wallowa County.

"The bag limit lifting is typically in places where we stock fish. It could occur at Kinney Lake. If we know those fish are going to die up there, (we'll do that)," he said.

So far, Wallowa County is in a better position than the rest of the state, although the

situation is not ideal. According to the website drought-monitor.unl.edu, about 60% of Wallowa County is considered to be in a "moderate drought," or D1, while the rest is step high at level D2, considered "severe drought." The scale ranges from no drought (two levels below moderate drought) to D4, which is an "exceptional drought." "Extreme" is level D3.

The entire state is in at least a moderate drought, and more than 80% is in a severe drought or worse.

The Wallowa Mountains, which still have snow on them, do offer the region help in that there still will be some meltoff. The water flowing from the mountains is also colder, Bratcher said, and fish can get upstream into the colder water to fare better.

"There are areas for fish to get away," he said. "We'll probably fare these con-

ditions better than a lot of places."

Colder water in the depths of Wallowa Lake is also a benefit.

Which means, for now, regulation changes are on hold.

"Right now we still have cold water," he said, adding decisions on whether to put restrictions in place will be on a wait-and-see basis. "Maybe nothing, but it could be some version of those hoot-owl regulations when water temperatures get high."

He said the best-case scenario for the coming months is for a milder, wetter summer.

The worst option is if it stays dry and temperatures consistently reach triple digits.

"Worst-case scenario is it stays extremely hot and dry all summer," he said, "and those fish have to stay in hot water for 12-14 weeks."

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 - "Oh, really?"
 - Most favorably
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 - Scary sound
 - Incoming flight info
 - Country in a Springsteen title, briefly
 - Pittsburgh-to-Baltimore dir.
 - Popcorn accompaniment, often
 - Omelet ingredient
 - Mini-___ (small stores)
 - "Thanks a million for all that help," and a theme hint
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 - What fills a sleeve
 - Yoga accessory
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 - Wards off
 - It's at the end of a 52-Across
 - Freezer container
 - Yearning (for)
 - Patron of people writing with quill pens?
 - Chocolaty cereal
 - "Science Guy" Bill
 - French money
 - Contract conditions
 - Stale
 - Gush

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- Hush-hush org.
- Chutzpah
- Pitcher's aim?
- Farm team
- Prescribed amounts
- Moody music genre
- Tennis star Marin whose surname is a palindrome
- "Later, maybe?"
- Most optimistic
- Gets ready to go out, maybe
- Those opposed
- 24 cans of beer, often
- Disco ___ ("The Simpsons" character)
- Muscles below pecs
- Also
- Alternative to a metal detector
- Novelist Hoag
- Get older
- Totally fine
- Accelerator, informally
- Also
- One may rate an app
- Reggae relative
- Hung out?
- Circle's center, in a variation of duck, duck, goose
- Actor/dancer Fred
- Hot Wheels toy
- Visitors from afar, briefly
- Gulps from a flask
- D.C. fundraising org.
- Unkind
- It might get lost in translation
- Binary type of question
- Little ones
- Texter's signoff
- They're saved on cellphones: Abbr.
- Lightweight boxer?
- Metallurg resource
- Haul from behind

- CLUES DOWN**
- Pellets that are shot
 - Bit of horse food

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