

The rains finally came

Drought was looming this spring until a major shift in the weather pattern in mid-May

By Jayson Jacoby
Baker City Herald

Mark Ward spends most of his time looking down at the crops growing in his family's fields, but on a few evenings this spring he just sat in his pickup truck, gazing up at the sky and smiling.

"Watching a rainstorm roll in and knowing we're going to be OK," Ward said.

He and other farmers and ranchers have had an abundance of gray skies to grin about over the past month in Northeastern Oregon.

But until around the middle of May the situation was more likely to induce grimaces.

The prospect of a potentially serious drought loomed.

Conditions were especially dire in Baker County, where Ward's family raises several crops, including potatoes, alfalfa, peppermint, wheat and silage corn.

In early April the U.S. Drought Monitor pegged conditions as "abnormally dry" in almost all of Baker County and in small sections of southern Union and Wallowa counties.

The previous six months were all drier than average at the Baker City Airport.

April brought no relief.

The monthly rainfall total of 0.2 of an inch was just 25% of average.

By the end of April about half of Baker County was in "moderate" drought, the least severe of four drought categories. The others, in order of magnitude from least to worst, are "severe," "extreme" and "exceptional."

The area in moderate drought included some of the county's main crop-producing valleys, including Baker, Keating, Pine and Eagle.

The area rated as abnormally

dry, meanwhile, had extended into the central part of Wallowa County, including the Wallowa Valley.

Mainly dry weather continued into the first half of May.

By the middle of that month almost all of Baker County was in moderate drought, as was a section of southern Wallowa County.

And close to half of Union County — but not including the

Grande Ronde Valley — was listed as abnormally dry.

But starting in mid-May those clouds that Ward admired from his pickup seat started to roll in at regular intervals from the North Pacific.

A series of storms that continued past the middle of June delivered copious volumes of rain at lower elevations and, in several cases,

more than a foot of snow high in the Elkhorns and Wallowas.

The Baker City Airport recorded 1.11 inches of rain during May — almost all of that falling after May 13, including a daily record of 0.54 of an inch on the 20th. That's a bit below the monthly average of 1.43 inches, which makes May the dampest month at the airport.

But even the below-average total

still was equal to the combined rainfall of the previous five months.

The weather shift was even more dramatic in La Grande.

The May total of 5.13 inches there was 3.14 inches above normal and the second-highest rainfall for May on record, trailing only 1991's 5.2 inches.

See **Rain** / Page 6



Lisa Britton/For the EO Media Group

Phillips Reservoir, on the Powder River in Baker County, didn't fill this spring but it came closer than irrigation officials expected.