DROUGHT PROMPTS CONTINUED DREAD

After dry winter, farmers and ranchers can only hope for a damp spring

Jayson Jacoby/EO Media Group

Ice still covered most of Phillips Reservoir near Baker City on March 25, 2022. The steep slopes above the share show how depleted the reservoir is due to lingering drought.

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March 7 was a mild Monday on Mark Bennett's cattle ranch in southern Baker County, and he expected to see some of the rapidly melting snow turn dry channels into temporary streams.

It didn't happen.

When he and his wife, Patti, walked out to one of their hayfields they hoped that the 4-inch-high stubble they left last fall to provide habitat for sage grouse would also have kept the soil moist by protecting it from sunlight and the desiccating winter winds.

Again they were disappointed.

What they found, Mark Bennett said, was soil better described as dust than as mud.

"The ground is so dry it just absorbs every bit" of the melting snow, he said.

Empty streambeds and parched pastures aren't the only troubling signs this spring as Bennett, in common with ranchers and farmers across Northeastern Oregon, braces for a second straight year of severe drought.

Bennett, whose ranch is near Unity, close by Baker County's border with Malheur County, said he typically sets his irrigation schedule based in part on how quickly snow recedes from the slopes of Bull Run Mountain, along the spine of high ground south of Unity that separates the Burnt River and Malheur River drainages.

On that same day, March 7, Bennett said he could see "sagebrush and patches of grass" on Bull Run's slopes.

Not snow.

"Which is not a good sign," he said.

The prospect for the drought not only to persist, but perhaps even to worsen, affects Bennett in both a professional and an electoral sense.

As one of the three Baker County commissioners, Bennett also has a vote in deciding whether to adopt a drought declaration and ask Oregon Gov. Kate Brown to sign a drought emergency for the county.

On April 6, Bennett joined his fellow commissioners in approving a drought disaster declaration for Baker County.

"It's going to be really, really tough," Bennett said.

A drought declaration could create possible options for farmers and ranchers, such as the temporary flexibility to divert water to fields that aren't usually eligible to be irrigated with water for which the producer has a legal right, he said.

But another possible tool — the ability to drill emergency wells — would be so expensive that Bennett doubts many producers would be able to make the "phenomenal investment."

One of the reasons, he said, is that costs for fuel and other supplies necessary to drill a well have risen dramatically over the past several months.

Combining the drought with rising prices for diesel and fertilizer — the latter also in short supply — and "you have a real crisis in the making," Bennett said. "It's a perfect storm of crises hitting simultaneously. It's going to be a challenging time for producers."

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