

SPRING RAIN | BAKER COUNTY

Grass:

Continued from Page 9

commissioner and signed a declaration in early April declaring a drought emergency in the county.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown later approved that declaration, making county farmers and ranchers eligible for potential state and federal assistance, including more flexibility in how they use their water rights.

Bennett said some fields on his ranch that weren't irrigated, due to a lack of water, were essentially bare at the start of spring.

But after the rains came, that grass sprouted and in some places it was more than a foot tall in late June.

"It really made a difference," Bennett said.

The bountiful grass is a boon in two main ways.

First, the rangeland where many of the county's cattle graze during the spring, summer and early fall will produce much more forage than during 2021, when the

combination of drought and a record-breaking heat wave in late June left pastures parched.

That ample forage, much of it on public land grazing allotments, also should reduce the demand for leased private land pastures in Baker County, Bennett said, making it easier for local ranchers to find suitable pasture for their herds.

"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."

— Mark Ward, Baker Valley farmer

Second, the higher yields in hay crops this year will reduce the need for some ranchers to buy supplemental hay. And that's a good thing to avoid, Bennett said, with hay prices, driven by last year's skimpy crop, running far above average.

Bennett said he has seen feeder-quality

hay fetching \$200 per ton, a figure he called "mind-boggling."

Irrigation supplies improve

The damp spring has also yielded another major advantage that farmers and ranchers hope for during the critical season — it saved irrigation water.

Pickard said that in early April, farm-

voir remained full — even slightly above its official capacity — at the end of June.

"Now we've got it made for water into September," Pickard said.

Had the weather reversal not happened — had the spring of 2022 more resembled its immediate predecessor, when every month was drier than usual — Pickard said he and his neighbors might well have been out of irrigation water by the end of June.

Having instead a full reservoir to draw on is a welcome, if unexpected, boon.

Phillips said he's rarely if ever seen Thief Valley fill so late in the year — the reservoir was still at 100% of capacity on the penultimate day of June.

He said he was optimistic, earlier in the spring, that the reservoir would eventually fill, considering the amount of snow in the Elkhorn Mountains, whose streams feed the reservoir.

But Phillips was also a bit leery.

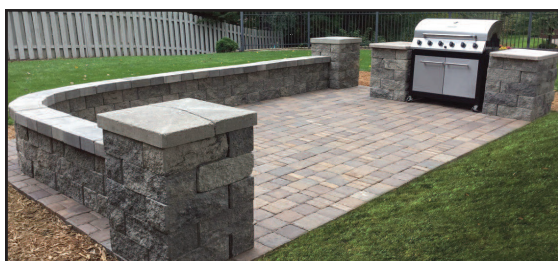
In 2021 the snowpack was similar, but much of the melting snow soaked into the soil rather than running off into streams.

See Grass, Page 13

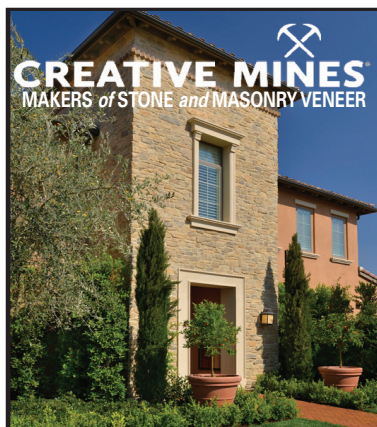
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