

SPRING RAIN | BAKER COUNTY

Grass:

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(One acre-foot of water would cover an acre of flat ground to a depth of one foot. The measurement equates to about 326,000 gallons.)

Elsewhere, two reservoirs that supply irrigation water to the North Powder Valley — Pilcher Creek and Wolf Creek — were rising through June as the last snow melted in their basins.

Doug Birdsall, manager of the Powder Valley Water Control District, said Pilcher Creek was full on June 21, and some of its water was supplementing, by way of a ditch, the slightly lower Wolf Creek Reservoir.

“Current stored water available is about 90% and still going up for now,” Birdsall said. “Hopefully there will be some carry-over into next year.”

The more water irrigation managers can retain in reservoirs when the growing season ends in early fall, the less winter snow is needed to refill them the following spring.

Alfalfa first cutting delayed

Siddoway, Pickard and Ward all had a similar experience with the first cutting of this year’s alfalfa crop.

Which is to say, it was late.

Generally from 10 to 14 days late, although Siddoway said in some cases he’d heard that farmers started cutting about three weeks later than usual.

The chilly spring weather — the average temperature at the Baker City Airport was about 6 degrees below average in April, and 4 degrees below average in May — slowed the growth of alfalfa.

And with rain lingering into late May and early June, the usual period for the first cutting, growers held off rather than risk having their hay soaked, which can slash its value.

Fortunately, when the spring spigot stopped, it did so suddenly, and it was followed by weather that Siddoway called ideal for cutting, curing and baling hay — warm, occasionally hot, days and a breeze to help dry the cut hay prior to baling.

In the last week of June the fresh scent of cut grass and alfalfa was redolent in Baker Valley, with hundreds of acres bearing the

distinctive, almost artistic, sinuous rows of curing hay.

Siddoway had to delay an interview on June 24 because he was, literally, “under a baler” preparing to put up the first cutting.

He said the one potential downside to the delay is that the third cutting — the final one, for most local farmers and ranchers — could be pushed back as well, into September when the longer, cooler and dewy nights can make it difficult to cure hay properly before baling.

Both Ward and Pickard acknowledged that possibility. But they said they would gladly exchange the potential for a troublesome third cutting for the wet spring that postponed the first cutting.

“I’m not going to worry about it all,” Pickard said.

Cattle prices

Siddoway describes cattle prices as “respectable,” although increases over the past year have been well below the rate of inflation.

Pickard said the drought created what he called a “glut” of cattle on the market,

including many that ranchers sold earlier this year because they feared, with a continuing drought, they wouldn’t be able to find or afford feed.

“The cattle market is trying to get better, and all the fundamentals are there,” he said. “But it never happens like it’s supposed to.”

Pickard said consumers who are dealing with rising prices for pretty much everything — including beef at the store — might think ranchers are benefiting, but that’s generally not the case.

With much of the nation’s meatpacking controlled by four large corporations, retail prices don’t necessarily track with what ranchers receive at auction.

Bennett called cattle prices “pretty good,” but he emphasized, like Pickard, that production costs — notably fuel, which in turn inflates the price of fertilizer and transportation — have increased more rapidly.

Pickard said he’s optimistic about the market.

But he’s not about to make a prediction.

“That’s asking me to look in my crystal ball, and sometimes it’s pretty blurry,” he said.

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