



State snow report already beats 2015

Warmer, drier weather forecast for NE Oregon

By George Plaven
EO Media Group

Oregon started off 2016 with more snow than at any point during last year’s historically dry winter, though more is needed to fill streams and reservoirs heading into next summer.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service issued its first water supply outlook report of the new year, and the numbers are promising: on Jan. 1, snowpack was 138 percent of normal across the state compared to just 53 percent a year ago.

Snowpack in the John Day Basin was 159 percent of normal compared to 95 percent last year. December precipitation was 174 percent of average, and precipitation from October through December was 117 percent of average.

NRCS summer stream-flow forecasts in the basin range from 113 percent to 137 percent of average. If conditions remain similar, water supplies are projected to be near normal to above normal this summer, the NRCS reports.

However, the long-range forecast is iffy at best. A strong El Niño in the Pacific Ocean will likely linger into spring, and the National Weather Service is calling for warmer, drier weather in northeast Oregon over the next three months.

Melissa Webb, snow hydrologist with the NRCS in Portland, said that could derail snowpack in a hurry. In fact, Webb said snowpack has already dipped from 149 percent to 105 percent in the Umatilla Basin since Christmas Eve, showing just how quickly things can change.

“A couple inches, plus or minus, is a pretty big deal,”

she said. “We really need to have pretty consistent storms.”

December undoubtedly delivered, with Jan. 1 marking the highest snowpack to start a year since 2011. But the effects of recent drought years are cumulative, Webb said. Simply put, it’s going to take more than a month of cold and snow to complete the turnaround.

Data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows that 2015 was Oregon’s warmest year on record, and the NRCS already reported last winter yielded the lowest snowpack on record. Those factors combined mean Eastern Oregon is still in moderate to severe drought.

Agriculture, fisheries and recreation were all hit hard by the 2015 drought. Without enough snow melt to recharge streams, some irrigation districts were forced to shut off water early. Low flows and high water temperatures killed off certain populations of fish, prompting the state to impose an unprecedented afternoon ban on fishing for trout, salmon, steelhead and sturgeon.

Wildfire season was also roughly three weeks longer in northeast Oregon, without snow cover to keep fuels from drying out early.

“We’re very excited to have a good start to the year after the drought last year,” Webb said. “We want to make sure we keep building our snowpack to get close to normal water supplies.”

Webb said she hopes the three-month forecast proves wrong. History has proven there are many different possibilities when starting out with a great season like this, she said.

“We are definitely in wait-and-see,” Webb said. “We’ve had our share of low snowpack winters in recent years. I’d like to see us buck that trend.”

By Mateusz Perkowski
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Two Oregon lawmakers plan to introduce bills that would ratify the decision by state wildlife officials to delist wolves as an endangered species.

The proposals, which will be considered during the upcoming legislative session in February, are planned by Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athens, and Rep. Greg Barreto, R-Cove, in reaction to a lawsuit filed by environmental groups.

In November 2015, the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission voted to delist the wolves under the state’s version of the Endangered Species Act after several criteria for their recovery had been met.

Under a management plan for wolves first created in 2005, the species could be delisted after having established four breeding pairs for three years and no longer facing a substantial risk of extinction in a significant portion of its range, among other criteria.

Wolves were delisted by the federal government in the easternmost portion of the state, but remain protected in the rest. Oregon wildlife officials have the jurisdiction over those wolves under the state ESA.

However, Oregon Wild, Cascadia Wildlands and the Center for Biological Diversity recently challenged the state’s delisting decision in court, arguing the decision unlawfully ignored the best available science about wolf recovery.

The bills, which will be introduced in the House and Senate, will provide the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife — which is overseen by the commission — more ammunition in defending itself in court, Barreto said.

“We’re shoring up what the commission has already decided,” he said during a Jan. 14 hearing before the House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Oregon has 81 documented wolves, but the actual population is likely in the range of 100-120 animals and a delisting is necessary for the ODFW to eventually manage the species, said Sen. Hansell.

Such management could involve hunting to keep popu-



Courtesy of ODFW
OR-3, a 3-year-old male wolf from the Imnaha pack, is seen in 2011.

lations in check

Ranchers in Oregon have abided by restrictions on wolf management for the past 10 years, so now that the criteria for delisting have been met, the state government should uphold the wolf plan’s credibility, said Rocky Dallum, political advocate for the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association.

“The goal was to strike a balance between reestablishing wolves in Oregon and meeting the needs of those producers,” he said.

During the decade that the plan has been in place, ranchers have felt a great deal of “heartburn” as state wildlife officials have refused to remove wolves that repeatedly prey on livestock, said Todd Nash, a rancher and chairman of the OCA’s wolf committee.

The wolf plan should be followed as planned rather than allowing the courts to take over the process, he said. “I want to bring some sanity to this and let the scientists and wildlife managers manage, instead of some conservation groups and a judge.”

Environmental groups oppose the proposed legislation, claiming that it will unnecessarily interfere with the authority of the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission.

Oregon has fewer than 90 wolves, but the state could sustain up to 1,400 of them, said Sean Stevens, executive director of Oregon Wild.

Currently, the species occupies only 12 percent of its potential habitat, he said. “The status of wolves in Oregon is still tenuous.”

In the past year, wolves have only been confirmed to have killed four cows, while the state has more than 1.3 billion cattle, he said. The cattle industry gen-

erated more than \$1 billion in revenues, making it Oregon’s top agricultural sector.

“The industry’s growth has not been stymied by the arrival of wolves,” Stevens said.

The proposed bills would set a dangerous precedent of the legislature inserting itself into delisting decisions on a species-by-species basis, said Quinn Read, Northwest representative of the Defenders of Wildlife environmental group.

“We’re concerned by initiatives that would circumvent the (wolf) plan,” she said.

Scott Beckstead, state director for the Humane Society of the United States, an animal rights group, said he’s worried about the possibility of trophy hunting of wolves in Oregon.

Hunters in Idaho, where such hunting is allowed, have demonstrated a “cruelty and depravity” in killing wolves that wouldn’t be tolerated by the public in Oregon, he said.

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