

# Ranchers prep for another dry year

Drought declaration could make resources available to help

By MICHAEL KOHN  
The Bulletin

MADRAS — Preparing for drought has become just another part of the growing season for Jefferson County cattle rancher JoHanna Symons.

For the third year in a row, Symons and other ranchers and farmers will be applying for state assistance once Gov. Kate Brown approves the drought declaration made earlier this month by Jefferson County officials.

Drought declarations open doors to farmers that are usually closed. They can graze animals on land in conservation reserve programs. They can pump groundwater from wells without previous water rights, after receiving an emergency use permit from the state. And there are programs that help pay for the cost of hauling water to livestock.

Symons, co-owner of the Madras-based Symons Beef Co., said the programs allow her and other businesses to stay afloat, but they are not sustainable.

“The programs are better than getting nothing at all,” said Symons. “But from a producer’s standpoint, we are better off with production and profitability on nondrought years.”

Drought programs will likely soon be available to farmers and ranchers across the tricoties. Crook County, the most drought-stricken of Central Oregon’s three counties, declared drought in early March, and Deschutes County declared drought on Wednesday, March 16.

The drought declarations come amid low snowpack and dry soil conditions across Central Oregon. They come as farmers and ranchers prepare for what could be their driest summer yet after two years of heat waves and emptied reservoirs.

There is typically a lag time of several weeks after the county declaration before the governor authorizes approval. Brown has already authorized a drought this year in Klamath County. Last year, drought declarations were in place in 26 out of 36 Oregon counties.

Wednesday’s declaration marks



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Rob Rastovich feeds cattle Wednesday, March 16, 2022, on his farm in Bend. Rastovich’s century-old family farm is facing a tough year after consecutive years of drought.

the third consecutive year that Deschutes County has declared a drought, and the first time the county has ever declared a drought three years in a row. Twice before the county had back-to-back droughts, in 1991-1992 and 2001-2002.

Bend Mayor Sally Russell is encouraging her fellow citizens to start conserving water ahead of summer.

“Going into this summer, it’s going to be important that everyone consider their water usage and consider each gallon to be their last so that we all have enough water,” said Russell. “Each one of us is counting on each other to make a difference.”

Deschutes County Commissioner Phil Chang said the unanimous vote on Wednesday could help county farmers and ranchers get water that is not normally available to them.

“A declaration from the governor will provide flexibility in moving

water around to where it is needed, emergency access to groundwater and potentially to state funding,” Chang said.

In addition to emergency use of groundwater, irrigators can also apply for low-interest loans from the Small Business Administration and potentially assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Nathan Garibay, emergency manager for the Deschutes County Sheriff’s Office, said in an email.

But Deschutes County cattle rancher Rob Rastovich said state and federal programs aimed at assisting farmers in need often aren’t enough to offset losses.

“It will help, but it may not be enough help,” said Rastovich.

Rastovich runs a small cattle farm on the eastern outskirts of Bend, producing high-quality beef from cows that are fed barley water and brewery mash. His family farm has been

in operation for over a century.

But due to low flows in the canals, Rastovich won’t receive enough water for his cows and will need to buy water from the municipalities to keep his animals alive. If the drought doesn’t end soon, Rastovich thinks real estate might be a better business option than farming.

“We’ll survive this year, but one more year like this and I might trade cows for houses,” said Rastovich. “Drought doesn’t seem to have affected the homebuilding industry.”

Central Oregon is one of the worst-hit areas in the U.S., with around half of the area in exceptional drought, the highest category of drought. As of March 15, the region’s snowpack stood at 74% of normal, according to data from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Precipitation to date for the water year is 84% of normal.

The situation is worse in the

Klamath Basin, where the snowpack is just 54% of normal and precipitation for the water year is 73% of normal.

The lack of precipitation has prevented reservoirs from filling and most have fallen to record low levels. Wickiup Reservoir, which holds water for farmers in Jefferson County, is just 52% full, with only two weeks left before the start of the irrigation season. Other reservoirs are in worse shape. Crescent Lake is 8% full; Prineville Reservoir is 22% full, and Ochoco Reservoir is 9% full.

Larry O’Neill, an associate professor at the Oregon State University College of Earth, Ocean, and Atmospheric Sciences, said the past two water years have been the driest on record for seven Oregon counties, including Deschutes, Crook, Jefferson and Klamath.

In addition to drying out soils and reservoirs, the drought conditions have also prevented streams and rivers from flowing at their normal heights. In September last year, a quarter of streamflow gauges around the state were at record low levels, according to U.S. Geological Survey data.

The extended periods of hot weather are also notable, said O’Neill. Last year Bend had 38 days when the average temperature was above 90 degrees, a record topped only in 1922 when the city experienced 50 days of 90-plus-degree temps.

“The prolonged hot weather increased evaporation from soils and plants, which exacerbated the impacts of the dry conditions,” said O’Neill. “The rain we did get didn’t go as far as it usually does in satisfying our water demand.”

Symons, the cattle rancher in Jefferson County, said the outlook for her ranching operations this year looks worse than in past seasons, and she expects just 20% of her 1,100-acre property will be in production.

Because so few fields can be planted with grass, she has been forced to trim the size of her herd from 5,000 cows down to just a few hundred. Buying hay wasn’t much of an option due to the soaring prices.

“It’s going to be very drastic this year,” said Symons. “I am pretty certain our income is going to be cut down to one-third of normal.”

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