

E. Oregon snow melting fast

By ALEX WITTMER
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon's snowpack is melting faster than expected, worsening an ongoing drought and pointing to a very dry year if conditions continue.

Scott Oviatt, a hydrologist and snow survey supervisor for the Natural Resources Conservation Service Oregon, a member of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said snow started melting almost two weeks earlier than usual, and many sites across the state hadn't even reached their peak available snowpack levels before melt off began in the lower elevations.

"Once the snowpack starts melting out, it's hard to stop," he said.

The information comes weeks after many Eastern Oregon snowpack levels were reported to be in good shape. The dramatic decline in snowpack levels coupled with the ongoing drought has caused concern among experts who are watching the snow water equivalent levels closely.

"The fact that we didn't reach a peak value and the fact that we're melting out early is a concern because we are losing the available water content in the snow pack (earlier) than we normally plan on," Oviatt said. "Depending on location and elevation, we're about two or three weeks early, and we didn't achieve our peak, and now we're at 70% for the



Blue Mountain Eagle, File

The Strawberry Mountain range near Prairie City.

Grande Ronde/Powder area and we're dropping rapidly."

Those who rely on water irrigation channels should be especially concerned about the rapidly melting snow. While snowmelt is generally expected to hit its zero point sometime in mid to late spring, having the water runoff begin and end earlier means that resources will become scarce as summer drags on — and a heat wave event can further impact water supplies and leave farmers and agricultural industries dry.

Last year's heat wave depleted water supplies and caused some farms in Oregon to run out of water entirely by late June 2021, weeks ahead of schedule. In one instance, Plantworks, a nursery in Cove, had to purchase new water storage containers and fill them with city water in order to keep their crops alive.

"Essentially, folks that rely on irrigation water will have less available, and there will probably be some restrictions applied depending upon where they get their water and

their water rights," Oviatt said. "There will be less available surface water for instream flows to support things. There will be less available groundwater storage because we're not recharging our system with our ground soil moisture and because we've been in a long-term drought and we didn't really recover from that over this winter."

Union County watermaster Shad Hattan agrees, stating that if the area doesn't get significant spring rain, "it will be hard on everything. Agriculture, stream flows. If we don't get moisture for April and May, that's (going to be) hard on everybody."

One silver lining to the early melt off and continuation of the drought? Fire season might be milder compared to last year.

"The biggest thing is how fast the snow we have right now comes off," said Trevor Lewis, assistant fire management officer with the Walla-Walla-Whitman National Forest. "If we lose our snow real quick, and it dries out fairly

quickly then our grass growth isn't as high, so we generally see lower rates of spread with our fires, even if we do have significant fuel moistures that are dryer. It really depends on how this snow comes off."

Lewis said that last year's slow runoff allowed for above average grass and brush growth — primary fuels for wildfires that were primed by the heat wave that pushed temperatures to record highs in most of Oregon. That grass growth meant that fires spread more rapidly, and in the case of the Bootleg Fire resulted in one of the nation's largest wildfires for 2021.

"It's kind of a catch-22 for us," Lewis said. "Does it come quickly and we have a drought? Or does it come off slow and we end up getting the grass growth?"

Despite being a La Nina year, the Eastern Oregon snowpack wasn't enough to start turning around the drought conditions in the area. As of March 31, most of Eastern Oregon remains in severe or moderate drought, and conditions are expected to worsen over the summer.

"In order to recover from that long-term drought we need successive years and we need excessive amounts of precipitation, and we're just not getting it," Oviatt said. "It's not going to happen this year, we're going to have to make some sacrifices in terms of surface water and available water."



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

An aerial view of Ochoco Reservoir in Prineville on Wednesday, March 30, 2022.

Reservoirs at record low levels

By MICHAEL KOHN
The Bulletin

PRINEVILLE — As the irrigation season gets underway, water authorities are taking stock of Central Oregon's reservoirs, and the reports coming back are worrying. Four of the five large reservoirs are at their lowest levels ever.

"I would like to report some good news, but it is hard to find any," said Jeremy Giffin, Deschutes Basin watermaster.

The reservoirs in question include Wickiup, Prineville, Crescent Lake and Ochoco. The fifth, Crane Prairie, is higher than past low levels due to federal requirements to protect the Oregon spotted frog.

Natural flow in the Deschutes Basin was classified as extremely low last year, but now rivers and streams are down an additional 15% from a year ago, said Giffin, whose job duties include regulating and distributing the waters of the state and enforcing water law.

River and stream levels are not expected to rise substantially this spring because of low snowpack in the Cascades. The low stream and reservoir levels will once again mean tight water allotments for irrigation districts, as well as calls for people to cut their water use at home.

"The vast majority of city water that is delivered in the spring, summer and fall goes to outdoor landscaping, so that is really a great place to make adjustments to water usage," said Giffin.

The Oregon Water Resources Department has advice for Central Oregonians who want to reduce their water use and help alleviate stress on the environment caused by the drought. Everyday lifestyle modifications can be considered, including shorter showers, using less water when washing dishes and clothes, avoiding hosing off driveways and decreasing the amount of water put on lawns.

Irrigation district patrons can save water by investing in more efficient sprinkler systems, or by leasing their water right instream.

"There is no reason to waste water. If you can conserve water and make that your mission, everyone should do that," said Kyle Gorman, region manager for the Oregon Water Resources Department.

As of Wednesday, March 30, Wickiup Reservoir was 55% full, a 5% decline from a year ago and a 42% decline from average, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation website. Prineville Reservoir was 26% full, a 49% decline from a year ago and a 70% decline from average.

Ochoco has been this area's worst-performing reservoir. As of Sunday, it was just 11% full, a 52% decline from a year ago and an 83% decline from its average height at this point in the year.

Municipal water use is just a small fraction of the water used by irrigation districts in Central Oregon so there is also water that can be saved on larger properties in outlying areas.

"If anybody in any of the (irrigation) districts has thought about not using their water, this would be the year to either not use it or to lease it instream, if available, through the district administration process," said Gorman.

The drought is causing financial losses in agricultural areas due to water allotment cuts, which forces farmers to leave large portions of their farms fallow. Last year, farmers in the North Unit Irrigation District, which holds junior water rights, were routinely following half their acres in order to plant at least a partial crop. The situation this year looks just as bad as in past years.

"We anticipate that irrigation districts will run out of water again this year. We also anticipate extremely low flows in the rivers," said Gorman.

Historically, the picture is equally bleak. The drought conditions are the worst on record, going back 127 years, according to data compiled by Oregon State University.

"The drought indicators in Central Oregon uniformly show the current drought is by far the worst in recorded history," said Larry O'Neill, associate professor at OSU's College of Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Sciences. "It, unfortunately, looks to continue throughout this summer."

O'Neill said climate models suggest cooler and drier than normal weather for April, with the weather in May to July showing dry and warm conditions.

On top of the record-low reservoir levels, snowpack is well-below average for the year. Snowpack seeps into underground aquifers in spring and is a good indicator of how high reservoirs will reach the following year.

Below average snowpack this year could result in even lower reservoir levels in 2023. As of Wednesday, snowpack in the Central Oregon Cascades was just 54% of normal and precipitation for the year stood at 81% of normal.

"Very disappointed and discouraged," said Gorman, when asked about this year's snowpack. "I was hoping for a much better winter this year, a recovery. But we just didn't get it. Our snowpack is way below average."

9 water rights tools you can use

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN
Capital Press

SALEM — As much of Oregon faces another year of drought, water experts say farmers and ranchers should be aware of all the tools available to them under the state's water laws.

At a seminar March 29, Elizabeth Howard, Oregon water law attorney, and Lindsay Thane, natural resources attorney, both of Schwabe, Williamson & Wyatt, spoke about nine tools for farmers through the state Water Resources Department, or OWRD.

"There are tools available to water users, especially in drought years," said Thane.

• **Drought transfers:** If Oregon's governor issues a drought declaration for a county, water users in that county can then access emergency water use tools, one of which is a "drought transfer."

According to Thane, a farmer can apply for an expedited, short-term drought transfer of their water right to change its type of use, place of use or location of the point of diversion.

• **Temporary emergency water use permits:** This tool is also only available to drought-declared counties.

According to Thane, if an existing surface water right doesn't have enough water during drought — for example, a stream dries up — then the farmer can apply for an emergency permit to temporarily tap into groundwater.

These expedited applications should take 10 days to process.

• **Temporary transfers:** A temporary transfer allows farmers to move water to areas of critical need.

Applicants need not come from a drought-declared county.

A farmer can change the place of use, point of diversion or type of use of a certified water right and can move water on their own property or temporarily transfer to another farmer.

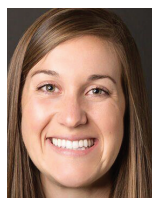
Unlike the first two tools, a temporary transfer takes longer to apply for and process.

"This isn't a particularly speedy pro-



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Irrigation systems on a farm near Mount Hood.



Lindsay Thane

cess most of the time," said Thane.

Howard said this tool "is really good to think about for long-term planning."

• **Agriculture water use transfers:** Howard said an agriculture water use

transfer can be useful during hot and dry years.

The tool enables a farmer with an existing irrigation water right to use that right for purposes other than irrigation — "incidental agricultural uses" including dust control, keeping farm animals cool or giving drinking water to livestock within limitations.

• **Limited licenses:** A limited license is a short-term tool for a farmer who does not have water right.

According to Howard, a farmer can apply for a limited water license to establish a crop for which further irrigation won't be required, such as a vineyard or hazelnut orchard, or to mitigate the impacts of drought when water is needed "to avoid irreparable damage to the user's crop."

• **Exempt water uses:** Howard said it's also useful for farmers to be aware of exempt water uses in Oregon — opportunities to use water within limitations without applying for a permit.



Elizabeth Howard

Farms may qualify for the surface water stock water exemption, commercial and industrial uses exemption and domestic water rights exemption.

• **Conserved water rights:** A conserved water right allows a farmer to shrink a water right temporarily and move the balance to other places, such as in-stream flows that benefit fish.

• **New water right:** A farmer can also apply for a new water right, but these are difficult to get.

"It's pretty much impossible to get a surface water right in Oregon right now because basically all the water has been allocated," said Howard.

Thane said getting a new groundwater right is more plausible, but OWRD has labeled some parts of Oregon as "groundwater restricted areas" where new wells can't be drilled.

• **Stored water right:** The final tool is called a stored water right, enabling a farmer to create a pond or reservoir.

For this tool, said Howard, a farmer needs two rights — the right to store water and the right to remove water from a reservoir or pond for a specific purpose. The right to store water is separate from the right to use the stored water.

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