



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Irrigation equipment waters a field west of Echo on Wednesday, April 21, 2021. Morrow and Umatilla counties are facing dry summers.

Morrow and Umatilla counties declare drought

By JADE MCDOWELL and BRYCE DOLE STAFF WRITERS

The Morrow County Board of Commissioners has formally declared a drought in the county and formally asked Gov. Kate Brown for state support.

A letter from commissioners to Brown, dated April 28, describes conditions this year as “severe” and projected to continue.

“There is a potential for Morrow County agricultural and livestock, natural resources, recreational and tourism, and related economies to experience widespread and severe damage resulting in extreme weather conditions in the County,” the letter stated. “The County is experiencing negative impacts in agriculture.”

It asks that Brown issue an executive order declaring a drought in Morrow County and that state agencies, including the Oregon Water Department, operate within their authority to assist the county in mitigating damage from the drought.

Under Oregon Revised Statute 536, if the governor issues an executive order stating that a county is experiencing a drought, it allows for increased flexibility in how water is managed, and gives farmers in that area a chance to apply for additional aid.

The resolution passed by the Morrow County Board of Commissioners, declaring the drought on a county level, states more than half the county is in severe drought and the rest is in moderate drought or abnormally dry conditions. If that continues, the resolution states, water users will have a significantly shortened season for water access, dam-

aging the county’s economy and creating an increased risk of wildfires.

Umatilla County faces dry summer

The Umatilla County Board of Commissioners in a Tuesday, April 20, meeting moved unanimously to declare a drought disaster in the county and asked that

“RIGHT NOW, THERE’S CATTLE FARMERS THAT ARE BEGINNING TO HAVE TO BUY HAY BECAUSE OF NO EARLY GRASS, AND THAT’S A BIG WORRY.”

Umatilla County Commissioner Dan Dorran

Gov. Kate Brown and U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack follow suit.

“We have a very large area in Umatilla County that is in the severe drought stage right now, with another equally large area in extreme drought,” Umatilla County Commissioner Dan Dorran said in the meeting, adding that “the rest of the county is either in abnormally dry or moderate drought.”

Dorran said people in the agriculture industry have been reaching out to him and voicing concerns over the current conditions.

“Right now, there’s cattle farmers that are beginning to have to buy hay because of no early grass, and that’s a big worry,” Dorran said. “Dryland wheat farmers, where are they going to be and what kind of moisture are they looking at? Are they going to be able to sustain the crops they have until the next rain they get?”

Don Wysocki, a soil scientist for Oregon State University based in Umatilla County, said this year’s wheat crop is in dire need of rain.

“If we get rain too late, we can’t really recover,” he said. “I think it’s still at a stage where if we get rain, we’d have pretty good recovery. But another week or two and we’re going to be beyond good recovery.”

Counties like Baker and Union have already declared a drought as much of Central and Eastern Oregon is experiencing either extreme or severe drought conditions, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer said he expects even more counties to join Umatilla and declare droughts in the coming weeks.

“As the summer months are coming closer and closer, I think we’re going to see some serious problems for our farmers and I want to do everything we can to protect them,” he said.

Despite the momentary relief brought by winter storms in February, the month of March in Umatilla County was the sixth driest on record in Pendleton and the second driest in Hermiston, according to Marilyn Lohman, a hydrologist for the National Weather Service in Pendleton. Since the first of October 2020, precipitation in both Pendleton and Hermiston has been reported lower than normal.

When interviewed near the end of April, Lohman said the month of April was shaping up to be one of the driest on record, though rain forecast for the final weekend could shift that slightly.

“If it starts raining, you’re going to hear the farmers go, ‘That’s a million dollar rain,’” Shafer said. “Because without it, it’s going to cost them a lot of money, but with that rain it’s going to bring in some money.”

Wyden talks mental health, policing at virtual town hall

By JADE MCDOWELL NEWS EDITOR

Mental health issues were top of mind for the first half of a virtual town hall that Sen. Ron Wyden held for Umatilla, Union and Wallowa County residents on Sunday, May 2.

Wyden broached the topic during the first question of the day, asked by Umatilla School District Superintendent Heidi Sipe, about federal support for students as the country rethinks “nearly every aspect of education” following the pandemic.

Wyden addressed standardized testing, saying that this year it seems best for teachers to address learning loss in the classroom rather than taking time out for standardized testing this year. He said schools will need additional funding to help students catch up after lost learning opportunities, and pointed out the funding included in the American Rescue Plan for schools to do just that through summer learning opportunities and other strategies. He said he is also concerned about students’ mental health, and wanted to see funding to adequately address those needs, too.

“I am very troubled by where we are with respect to mental health services, particularly for children, (and) seniors in rural areas,” he said. “The mental health claims as a result of the pandemic have gone through the stratosphere.”

He revisited the topic after a question by Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock, who said he was hearing from police that they want to “get out of the mental health business” and wanted to know what Wyden was doing to

address that issue.

Wyden said he knows that police don’t want to be forced into acting as mental health counselors, but mental health professionals also don’t want to be forced into acting as police. So he is has been pushing in the last year for Congress to pass the CAHOOTS Act, modeled after a program started in Eugene, that would fund partnerships between law enforcement and mental health professionals to form joint 24/7 crisis response teams. One billion dollars in seed money for a CAHOOTS-like program reimbursed through Medicaid was included in the American Rescue Plan.

Wyden said the topic is very personal for him, because the Wyden household spent many years worried about the safety of his brother, who had schizophrenia and was often wandering the streets late at night.

Murdock told Wyden that Umatilla County is very interested in participating in a CAHOOTS program, and has already set aside hundreds of thousands of local dollars in the budget to be able to jump on board when gets started. Wyden said the federal funding will be channeled through the states, and he hopes to see rural communities participate.

“I’m thrilled that Eastern Oregon wants to be the rural example for CAHOOTS,” Wyden said.

Briana Spencer from Pendleton asked about what can be done to increase racial equity in rural Oregon, noting that as a visible Black Lives Matter activist in the county, she has seen a lot of racism coming her way. Wyden said as chair-

man of the Senate Finance Committee, the committee has tried to include a focus on addressing racial inequities in everything it does. In talking about banking, for example, he said they have looked at why Black and Latino communities on average have less access to capital.

“On the health care front, a lot of our BIPOC communities, as you know, are almost health care deserts,” he said. “You know, what we’ve got is fabulous health care facilities in a lot of communities, for example, where affluent whites are, and then not many services for Black and Latino communities.”

One of the health care disparities he has worked to address, he said, is getting additional Medicaid funding to address maternal mortality disparities. According to data tracked by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Black mothers have 40.8 pregnancy related deaths per 100,000 pregnancies, compared to 12.7 deaths per 100,000 for non-Hispanic white mothers.

During the town hall, Wyden also addressed questions on farming, trade, natural resources, unmanned aerial drone ranges, student loan forgiveness and voting. In closing, Wyden described a “love affair” with Eastern Oregon, and said he wants to send a message that he opposes the idea voiced recently that some people want to see Eastern Oregon absorbed by Idaho.

“We are not giving up Eastern Oregon. It’s not going to happen on my watch,” he said.

A recording of the full town hall can be found on the People’s Town Hall Facebook page.

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