

Water May Be in Short Supply

By DAVID LESTER
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February's below-normal precipitation has further dimmed the outlook for summer water supplies in the Yakima Irrigation Project, making some water rationing a certainty.

The coming season, however, is not expected to approach the historic 2001 drought, when some irrigators received just 37 percent of a full supply.

Current reservoir storage and total precipitation are better than in 2001.

Just what farmers with junior water rights can expect should come into focus next Thursday, when the Bureau of Reclamation releases the first water supply forecast for 2003.

"My gut feeling is we will be in a rationing situation," said Jim Willard of Prosser, a Roza Irrigation District farmer and district director. "It is a question of what level we will be at."

Willard said the 72,000-acre district is preparing contingency plans to deal with a reduced supply.

He said the district, like others in the basin, is continuing to pipe its distribution network to reduce seepage and evaporation.

"We are a lot more prepared for this water shortage than we have the previous ones," he added.

There is still some time to improve the outlook. March snows would help a lot.

Storms poised to cross the Cascade Mountains after the middle of next week should provide a total of several inches of snow, according to National Weather Service forecaster Diann Coonfield in Pendleton, Ore.

Farmers producing crops in the Roza and Kittitas divisions will be hardest hit. All of their water supplies are subject to rationing when there isn't enough water to supply all demands. Lesser levels of rationing also will occur in the Wapato Irrigation Project, the Sunnyside Division and Yakima-Tieton divisions, which have a combination of senior and junior rights.

Those divisions, along with the Kennewick Irrigation District, account for 90 percent of the land irrigated in the three-county 460,000-acre federal project.

Quentin Kreuter, the bureau's river operator in Yakima, said the 55 percent of normal precipitation served to replenish the snowpack to what it was at the end of January.

Heavy rains and warm temperatures in late January melted off some of the snowpack.

"The problem is the snow is patchy. We don't have a consistent snowpack," Kreuter said Friday.

Including February's low snowfall, precipitation for the season is at 78.3 percent of average. Water content in the mountain snowpack ranges from 64 to 74 percent of normal.

Storage in the five reservoirs as of Friday morning was more than 579,000 acre-feet of water. An acre-foot is the amount of water needed to cover an acre of land to a depth of one foot.

By contrast, total precipitation through the end of February 2001 was just 49 percent of average and water content in the snowpack was 61 percent of average.

Storage at the end of February 2001 was only 337,000 acre-feet.

Precipitation during February 2001 at the five reservoir sites was less than 50 percent of normal.

