

Water Outlook — Irrigators Should Be OK

By DAVID LESTER
YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC
Friday, March 7, 2003

It's only an estimate, but irrigators up and down the Yakima River Basin will take it just the same.

The federal Bureau of Reclamation on Thursday issued its first estimate of the season, saying all water users should receive at least 71 percent of a full supply for this summer as a result of below-normal precipitation.

The estimate is based on 80 percent of normal precipitation the rest of the season, which follows the trend of the past three months.

Should precipitation improve to average, however, irrigators could get as much as 85 percent of a full supply, the bureau said. The agency operates the 460,000-acre Yakima Irrigation Project.

While the current estimate means some discomfort, most irrigation managers said their water users should be able to avoid significant crop damage.

And, with snow falling heavily in the Cascade Mountains as it has for the past day, odds seem to suggest the water supply may improve.

More snow is expected through early next week.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service reported on Thursday the current winter storm dropped new snow ranging from about 10 inches to as much as two feet in the higher elevations of the Cascades.

"I'm figuring we will be up from that 71 percent estimate," said Ric Valicoff, a Roza Irrigation District fruit grower and chairman of the district's board of directors.

Valicoff, who attended Thursday's announcement at the bureau office in Terrace Heights, added water conservation measures the district has undertaken, such as piping delivery ditches, will help the 72,000-acre district better manage its water.

"We worked hard to get there. It's now starting to reward us."

The Roza and the Kittitas Reclamation District are most susceptible to the effects of water shortages and will receive the rationing level that is ultimately adopted. That is because all of their water rights are junior to older, senior rights. Junior rights are rationed when there isn't enough to go around.

Other major irrigation districts, including the Sunnyside, Yakima-Tieton, and Wapato divisions, have a combination of senior and junior rights. Water users in those divisions would receive more than 71 percent of normal water.

It is a far cry from 2001, when the worst drought on record left some irrigators with little more than a third of a normal water supply. The drought two years ago forced Roza to suspend deliveries for three weeks and the Kittitas district to end its season in early August.

None of that is expected this year.

Jack Carpenter, manager of the 59,000-acre Kittitas district, said he hopes the estimate stays above 70 percent.

"If we can hang on to this number, the Kittitas Valley will be tight. There will be impacts, but they are in a manageable range," he said.

Those impacts include a potential drop in crop production.

Tom Monroe, operations manager for the Roza, said the district will plan to deliver water into early October. Normally, the district's season ends Oct. 20.

Don Schramm, assistant manager of the Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District, said his farmers should get close to an average supply as long as they practice conservation.

The district operates the Sunnyside Canal that serves a total of 103,000 acres.

Bureau of Reclamation engineer Chris Lynch said total precipitation this winter has been 78 percent of average, some 60 percent greater than 2001.

Water content in the basin snowpack averages 63 percent of normal, compared to 61 percent in 2001.

Basin reservoirs are in much better shape than in 2001, holding about 590,000 acre-feet of water. Two years ago, storage at this time of the season was just 337,000 acre-feet.