

March Precipitation Has Irrigators Smiling

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A wet March has pretty much put to rest concerns that the Yakima Valley's 2003 irrigation season will be burdened with severe water rationing.

How wet was it?

Try 201 percent of normal precipitation through March 30, making it among the wettest Marches on record.

"Everyone up here is smiling and much more relaxed," Jack Carpenter, manager of the Kittitas Reclamation District in Ellensburg, said Monday.

"We had a fantastic March," Carpenter added. "We'll take that on a regular basis."

Tom Monroe, operations manager for the Roza Irrigation District in Sunnyside, called the month's results a blessing.

The irrigation season officially begins today.

Both districts would've been most at risk had March turned out drier than normal.

The Kittitas and Roza districts have water rights that are subject entirely to being rationed during a shortage. Their rights are considered junior to older, or senior, rights.

Other major districts in the three-county Yakima Irrigation Project are less exposed to shortages because they have a combination of senior and junior rights.

A dry month would have eroded estimates that junior users would receive just 71 percent of a full supply.

The Bureau of Reclamation, which operates the three-county 460,000-acre project, based the estimate on precipitation being 80 percent of average the rest of the summer.

At least for March, it hasn't turned out that way.

Quentin Kreuter, the bureau's river operator, said the 40.4 inches of rain and snow that fell at the five major reservoirs during March made up for a drier-than-normal month of February.

"The month treated us well," he said.

February's precipitation was just 55 percent of normal, resulting in a season average of 78 percent. Water season calculations begin Oct. 1.

The 59,000-acre Kittitas district is the last of the project's six major districts to start preparing for the 2003 water season.

Carpenter said the district will begin priming its canal April 18 or shortly thereafter, meaning initial deliveries to district farmers about April 23.

Just how big a boost the month provided to the summer water supply won't be known until the bureau issues an updated water supply forecast on April 7.

Having 201 percent of normal precipitation is not the most ever for the month, according to bureau figures.

That distinction belongs to March 1997, when officials measured more than 51 inches of

precipitation — or 257 percent of normal. It was the wettest March since 1912.