

'77 Drought a Dry Run for 2001

Published in the Herald-Republic on Sunday, July 29, 2001

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YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

The drought of 2001 has drawn regular comparisons to the water shortage of 1977.

Both years featured low streamflows statewide and corresponding energy shortages, a poor snowpack and drought-related crop and job losses, according to an analysis by the state Ecology Department.

There are, however, a number of locally significant differences.

In the first place, the rationing level imposed on holders of junior water rights this year is at 35 percent and expected to remain there the rest of the irrigation season.

An initial 1977 Bureau of Reclamation forecast gave junior users only 6 percent of a full supply. The disastrous forecast led to drastic proposals, such as state-sponsored cloud seeding and digging a canal to bring Columbia River water to the Yakima Basin. The cloud seeding did take place. The proposed \$90 million Columbia River canal idea was shelved.

By the end of the season, however, rationing was at a manageable 71 percent, although it came too late for those who idled land or shifted crops to the Columbia Basin.

The improvement resulted from correcting a forecasting error and from higher rainfall during the summer.

Further, the 464,000-acre Yakima Irrigation Project began the season with twice as much water in its reservoirs than the 335,000 acre-feet in storage this year.

The forecasting error -- a failure to include an estimate of water that can be reused -- set off a chain reaction of lawsuits.

The Roza Irrigation District, a junior district, challenged the Bureau of Reclamation's decision on how to allocate the year's water supply. Later, the Yakama Nation filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Spokane. The nation asked the court to recognize its 1855 treaty-based right to water ahead of all other water claims.

In response, the state Ecology Department sued everybody. The agency filed its suit in October 1977 to establish an amount and priority date for all surface water rights in Kittitas, Yakima and Benton counties and end the water wars.

That case, state of Washington v. James J. Acquavella, continues today. The Ecology Department chose Acquavella as the named defendant because of his name's similarity to a synonym for water. He was the owner of five acres in the Richland area at the time the suit was filed.

Another major difference between the two years is that endangered species demands overlay the 2001 season, placing new demands on water supplies. Steelhead and bull trout are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

A 1994 federal law designed to help farmers use water more efficiently requires minimum Yakima River flows be maintained at Parker and Prosser to protect fish. Some of that protective water must come from storage. No similar requirement existed in 1977.

The state Ecology Department has updated the comparison between 1977 and 2001 several times this year.

The comparison looks at streamflows, crop losses, drought-related job layoffs, forest fires and emergency water permits.

Streamflows

1977: The amount of water in state streams from April through September was projected at between 30 percent and 70 percent of normal. Flows in the Columbia River at The Dalles were forecast to be 52 percent of normal, 2 percentage points less than the previous record low in 1926.

2001: Forecasts of streamflows in major rivers range from 41 percent to 70 percent of normal. On July 1, the Columbia River at The Dalles was forecast at 52 percent of normal, matching the 1977 record.

Drought-Related Crop Losses

1977: Drought crop losses estimated at \$67 million, about 5 percent. Dryland wheat and barley were hardest hit.

2001: Farmers and agriculture-related industries are estimated to lose up to \$400 million, including 90,000 acres of land idled in the Columbia Basin Project to reduce energy consumption and maintain river flows.

Jobs

1977: Layoffs in the aluminum and agriculture industries were projected at between 7,500 and 10,000.

2001: Job losses in agriculture alone are estimated at 5,600 to 8,900 jobs.

Forest Fires

1977: A total of 245 forest fires reported, about three times the number reported in 1976. No acreage figure was available.

2001: Washington's federal, state and private forests had 489 fires as of July 16 that burned 23,000 acres.

Emergency Water Permits

1977: Ecology issued 400 temporary ground-water permits for new wells.

2001: Ecology issued 142 emergency water-right permits and transfers of existing permits, including 97 transfers and 45 emergency water permits for farmers and municipalities in Yakima and 10 other counties. New well permits have all but been eliminated this year because Ecology calculates the water isn't available.