

Dry, Dry Again

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Silent and unyielding, drought stalks Central Washington during this unsettling summer of 2001. Crops are wilting, jobs are evaporating and income needed to sustain farm families and rural communities is vanishing, stolen away by this drought like a thief in the night.

The drought could mean staggering losses, estimated in one analysis at more than \$270 million in reduced income for farmers, lost jobs and less money circulating through the local economy.

Some of those effects already are being felt. Farm employment is down. Farm service businesses are reporting steep declines in sales and have laid off workers to compensate.

Land has been idled in some parts of the Yakima Valley because there isn't enough water to go around, or the water has been transferred to another district suffering a worse shortage. The Roza Irrigation District, among the most severely affected, has drained its reserves of \$2 million to buy precious water.

And like victims of theft, area residents are sensing a loss of confidence and an eroding optimism about the future.

They also are grieving.

Carelessness may have lit the match, but drought fueled the fire that took the lives of four young area firefighters July 10 in a tinder-dry and remote part of the Okanogan few people had ever heard of.

The entire Northwest has many weeks yet during which it must deal with the threat of raging forest fires, much as during the Chelan-area Tyee Creek and the Lakebeds complex fires in Klickitat County in 1994.

"Locally in Central and Eastern Washington, we have the potential to have fires like the ones in Montana last summer," said Mick Mueller, an ecologist for the U.S. Forest Service's Leavenworth Ranger District. Wildfire blackened more than 600,000 acres in Montana and a similar amount in Idaho last year. It was the worst wildfire season in the West in 50 years.

Preparing for the Worst

When Gov. Gary Locke declared a drought emergency March 14, the outlook statewide was bleak for municipal water supplies, irrigation, migratory fish and power production. But spring rains eased drought worries in Western Washington and the dryland wheat country in the far eastern part of the state.

Doug McChesney, state Ecology Department coordinator for drought response, said the Yakima Basin continues to suffer because of its reliance on a limited water-storage system that places a premium on a healthy snowpack every year. Also, a greater percentage of Central Washington farmland relies on junior water rights than the rest of the state.

When the snowpack doesn't come during the winter, the basin suffers, as it has this year.

The numbers tell the story: As of June 1, the amount of water in the snow was just 22 percent of average. All snow was gone by July 1. The total amount of water produced in the watershed through July was just 46 percent of average and the second-lowest in 75 years, second only to 1977. Reservoir storage on July 1 was just 66 percent of average, the second-lowest in 60 years.

"The west side of the state is clearly better off. It's the band down the middle of the state from the Cascade crest to the east where the worst of the problems are," McChesney said.

When higher energy costs, higher fertilizer costs and three years of poor marketing conditions for apples and other crops are added in, Central Washington farmers are carrying most of the burden for the rest of the state.

"They are getting clobbered. There is no doubt about that," McChesney added.

The region went through a nearly identical drought in 1994, but as McChesney suggested, this year's record drought couldn't have come at a worse time.

Searching for Storage

Already reeling from several years of poor market prices, the 2001 drought is staggering the area with another body blow.

"Farmers are survivors, but they are being pushed about as far as they can be pushed," observed Tom Carpenter, a longtime Granger farmer on the Roza Irrigation District.

Carpenter and other basin farmers are once again pushing for new water storage to insulate the basin from drought. The five Cascade lakes in the Yakima Irrigation Project can store less than half the water used in the basin each year.

No new storage has been constructed since 1933. In the intervening years, the basin went through a natural maturing process with the planting of more perennial crops like apples and other tree fruits, mint, grapes, and hops that must have water every year to survive. Also, a relatively new demand for water to protect threatened fish is taxing the system further.

Carpenter, a diversified grower and an active player in basin water issues for many years, said the people who built the basin found ways to get things done.

"I wonder what's wrong with us. Why don't we have the vision to do what we need to do and take care of everyone's interests?" he asked. "We are just fighting over the crumbs."

The impacts aren't being felt solely on the 72,000-acre Roza or the 59,000-acre Kittitas Reclamation District, where farmers are receiving barely a third of a normal water supply.

They are at the end of the line in a water-rights system that favors those who were here first. The first homesteaders have what are called senior water rights. Their rights are satisfied first when there isn't enough to go around. Later arrivals, known as juniors, share what's left.

It is a system that has led to the most restrictive rationing in the Yakima Irrigation Project's 96-year history. In 1994, junior users were limited to 38 percent of a full supply.

But because the large irrigation divisions in the 464,000-acre project have a combination of senior and junior rights, farmers in other parts of the basin, like the sprawling Wapato Irrigation Project, are struggling with too little water to have a successful harvest.

Adding Up the Dollars

A 4-year-old economic-impact analysis prepared by Northwest Economic Associates of Vancouver, Wash., an agriculture and natural resources economics consulting firm, suggests a water shortage like 2001 would cut farm income in the Yakima River Basin by \$136 million, or 13 percent of the total in an average year.

When the effect of smaller crops on processors, farm suppliers, trucking and retail are included, the figure balloons to more than a quarter of a billion dollars.

The firm prepared the report for the Tri-County Water Resource Agency, a Yakima-based consortium of counties, cities and irrigation districts working to meet all water needs in the three-county basin.

William Dillingham, a senior economist for the state Employment Security Department, said the agency is trying to track the effects of a historic water shortage on employment in Central Washington counties.

"Yakima County has a huge amount of its employment associated with agriculture. When you tie in food processing, transportation and ag services, that number begins to get pretty big, pretty quickly," he said.

State officials have taken a stab at just how big. Using the Northwest Economic Associates study as a basis for their estimate, four state agencies in late June projected the 2001 drought could cut statewide farm production by up to \$400 million, or about 12.5 percent of total farm production. In addition, up to 7,500 farm jobs would be lost, as would up to 1,400 jobs in the farm-related processing, trucking, wholesaling and warehousing industries.

The projection recognizes the local losses would not be mirrored statewide because other parts of the state have near-normal water supplies and would have average crop production.

In the midst of all this, Central Yakima Valley fruit growers suffered millions of dollars in crop damage from a freak and powerful wind-and-hail storm in late June, with gusts clocked at 108 mph in one Zillah orchard.

Looking at the growing tale of woe, a state official asked privately: "What's next, a plague of locusts?"

Fish Are Suffering, Too

River flows depleted to record lows in some places because of too little winter snow are threatening the Northwest's multimillion-dollar investment in saving its declining salmon and steelhead runs. More water is being used to turn Columbia River power turbines to generate needed power, exposing more fish to a near-certain death.

The Yakima Valley's celebration of a huge returning run of adult spring chinook this year, the largest in at least 50 years, is tempered by the prospect that some of these fish won't spawn successfully in low September river flows.

Also, young chinook salmon and threatened steelhead trout starting their dangerous journey to the Pacific Ocean are being subjected to higher water temperatures and more predators as the Lower Yakima River, southeast of Prosser, rides along slightly above minimum streamflows.

Higher fish losses this year would mean a smaller run of adults in two to three years. Dwindling numbers could turn up the pressure for more fish protective measures.

"Rising water temperatures may not kill fish by itself, but predators are more active eaters when temperatures are higher," said Dale Bambrick of Ellensburg, the Eastern Washington habitat team leader for the National Marine Fisheries Service. "It's a double whammy. The salmon and steelhead critters aren't functioning well."

Drought Effects Reach Far

The struggle on the farm is being felt in town, too.

City residents in parts of Yakima and Kennewick are being required to rotate water use to make an inadequate supply stretch.

Workers in industries that supply farmers and process the commodities they produce are being laid off because there is too little work.

Duane Huppert, who has owned Huppert Farm and Lawn Center in Ellensburg for 17 years, said he canceled a farm implement order this spring when the initial water forecast came out in March.

"When that came out, it was like turning off the business as far as ag sales are concerned," Huppert said.

"It really stops any farmer from buying anything when you look at a year like this."

"As a farm equipment dealer, our sales were cut drastically," he added.

Huppert, who sells John Deere products, said he is concerned about the lingering effects of this drought into next year and beyond.

"This community is an ag community whether people like it or not," he said. "We get a lot of income from farmers, and the money they spend goes through a lot of businesses."

In the heart of the Yakima Valley in Sunnyside, Bleyhl Farm Service, a supplier of feed, fuel, fertilizer and equipment to farmers, also is feeling the pinch.

Verle Kirk, the firm's Sunnyside store division manager, said the firm cut its work force in Sunnyside by about 14 percent to some 70 employees in response to a cut in sales.

Sales of irrigation equipment dropped when the Roza shut down for three weeks in May to stretch its water supply. Sales have not recovered, Kirk said.

Farmers are also buying less nitrogen fertilizer because of higher costs for natural gas used to produce it. Corn seed isn't moving because the crop requires more water.

"It seems like these guys are shopping harder. Profitability hasn't been good the last two years," he said.

"It hasn't been good this year. If they don't make money, it won't get any better next year."