

# Farmers Lament Fate, Future

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Arnold Martin isn't into self-torture.

But there he was, not long ago, fresh from a June wheat field with the yellowish complexion of August, looking over Bumping Lake like a man who had just crawled through a desert.

All that water.

If only there were more of it, the 56-year-old thought, standing far from his farm northeast of Sunnyside and the dry conditions he and others within the Roza Irrigation District are facing this summer.

Roza farmers, with their water rights taking a big back seat to others with senior rights under a 1945 U.S. District Court consent decree, will receive just 35 percent of their normal water supply this year before the district shuts off the water in early September.

Right now, that translates to 1.8 gallons per minute per acre, according to Tom Monroe, Roza Irrigation District assistant manager.

In a normal year, Roza growers receive about 7 gallons per minute per acre, Monroe said.

Roza officials shut down the system for three weeks in May to save water for perennial crops such as apples and grapes later in the season, but growers have had a steady -- albeit small -- flow since then.

None of that comes from Bumping Lake. Roza growers' water source is Lake Cle Elum and the Kachess and Keechelus reservoirs.

Bumping mostly serves the Sunnyside and Wapato irrigation districts.

Nonetheless, Martin and others, such as Outlook-area farmer Larry Haak, thirst for relief under parched conditions.

Martin's visit to Bumping Lake provided at least a visual respite and a break from his daily grind.

"It's pretty. I was interested to see how full it was," said Martin, who this year had to slash his corn crop by 300 acres -- down to about 200 acres -- and switch to a wheat crop that consumes less water but also puts less money in Martin's pockets.

"It's like figuring how you're going to lose the least amount of money," he said. "The margins in farming are really slim, so anything that Mother Nature does to you, those margins disappear and then some."

The drought has forced Martin to use a couple of wells his father, Robert Martin, drilled in 1977 -- underground saviors he resorted to during the 1994 drought.

"It's not cheap water. You don't use it unless you have to," he said, citing electricity costs for pumping.

Martin started with 40 acres of corn in 1967, but he eventually moved into native spearmint and organic Concord grapes as well, as have his sons, Troy and Steve.

Martin remembers dry years and stories his father would swap with other farmers about bad times -- laments that flowed back and forth between pickups parked along dusty back roads or across coffee-shop tables.

He tried to remember a worse year.

"There weren't any this bad," he said from his kitchen table.

As if water shortages aren't enough, many Roza growers increasingly have to compete with larger operations, both domestic and abroad, that can grow greater volumes of crops. That's why Martin said he doesn't grow scotch spearmint, which China can grow and sell for about \$8 a pound.

"That's less than our cost of production," Martin said.

With a midday sun falling on his shoulders, Martin stopped along Sheller Road to look over a wheat field he tried to fashion from shallow, rocky soil with little water to nurture it.

The wheat should have stood tall and green with 25 to 30 kernels on each head, like that in another field rescued by the wells Martin's father drilled 24 years ago.

This year, however, some heads contain as few as a dozen kernels.

"If you've got water and can keep it wet, you can get a good crop," he said. "You can see the dry spots and the waviness."

On another 24 acres nearby -- a lush green blanket of silage corn a year ago -- he didn't even bother trying.

"This is my nonfarming field," he said.

The forced change in crops will affect more than Martin, who normally would hire seven people to help him during a six-week corn harvest.

Harvesting his 270 acres of wheat will take two weeks and three people.

In a normal year, he'd hire four irrigators, cutting back to three by midsummer.

This year? He's down to one -- from three earlier in the summer.

"It's like a miniature version of Mother Nature and the cherry crop. Those people are out of work," said Martin, referring to the June storm that damaged a third of the Lower Valley cherry crop and other fruit, thereby costing many people their jobs.

With his corn crop slashed, Martin could have turned to his mint, but his yields -- normally 180 to 200 pounds per acre -- are down about 25 percent.

It doesn't help that the drought occurred in the perennial crop's second year. Martin had to replant his mint on new land after he lost his lease on a more mature crop a couple of years ago.

Larry Haak, a first-generation farmer near Outlook, gave up growing corn altogether this year "because I didn't have the water."

Like Martin, he switched to wheat, which takes its water early. That saves something for the alfalfa and apples he grows.

Where Martin's wells helped him, Haak has stored water in ponds. That proved to be a savior when Roza officials shut off the water May 8-29.

Looking at the ponds only reminds Haak of a need for more storage in the mountains.

"If they don't do it up above us, we have to do it down here," he said. "That's the key to the future. The fish need it. Farmers need it. Cities and towns need it."

But environmentalists, whom Haak criticized for demanding water for fish that wouldn't exist were it not for man-made reservoirs, won't "get on board," he said.

"We're going to be like Klamath Falls before long, where we dry up and blow away," he said.

Haak, however, grows hopeful over signs that Gov. Gary Locke appears to share his sentiments.

Locke, in a visit to Yakima in April, said he favors new water storage to avoid a repeat of current drought conditions.

"It took Nixon to open China, and it's going to take a Locke to get more storage," he said.

Added storage obviously won't come before the scheduled Sept. 10 shutdown, however, if it comes at all.

Haak wanted to plant some alfalfa hay for next year, "but I can't do that now," he said.

Martin's thoughts return to the mountains and the coming winter -- will there be another drought next year?

Looking over a fallow field -- the only green from sporadic patches of weeds -- Martin can't stand the thought of a repeat.

"I enjoy farming, but this year just hasn't been any fun. There's too much guessing," he said. "This is directly affecting our livelihood. We do need more storage."



SANDY SUMMERS/Yakima Herald-Republic

The land around Sunnyside is dry and inhospitable without irrigation water to support crops. Arnold Martin said he's taken 300 acres away from his corn crop this year and switched them to wheat, which consumes less water -- and pays him less money.



SANDY SUMMERS/Yakima Herald-Republic

Arnold Martin checks the output of his well while on afternoon rounds of his crops last week. Martin, who farms near Sunnyside, doesn't normally use the well but has been forced to this year to supplement a small water supply.