

Farms' Future Wilts Without Water Supply

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BADGER POCKET, KITTITAS COUNTY -- From his family farm on the north side of Manastash Ridge, Bill Lowe can see far to the northwest across the Kittitas Valley.

The view is the stuff of picture postcards. A placid rural scene with fields in varying shades of green like the pieces of cloth in a quilt.

But this tranquil setting belies the fears that tug at people like Lowe and his neighbors this year. The concern extends into Ellensburg, where businesses and jobs will suffer because of a bad year on the farms.

He is uncertain about the future of farms like the one he and his brother, Mike, operate here in the Kittitas Reclamation District.

This is the worst drought Lowe has experienced in his 21 years in farming, and it could affect him for years to come. There's no safety net, no federal or state assistance package for hay growers. Crop insurance is too restrictive to do him any good, he said.

He can't know whether the drought -- as painful as it has become -- is a one-year episode to be endured or the start of another extended dry period like the three-year drought of the early 1990s.

The 59,000-acre district is receiving just 35 percent of a full supply of water because of its status as a junior water-right district. It is the most restrictive rationing in history.

It has forced the district to make some very tough choices. Manager Jack Carpenter said district directors chose to use all of the district's water by the end of July so hay growers -- the vast majority of district users -- can harvest one cutting.

The decision leaves the growers of fruit on about 2,000 acres to rely on backup wells and the whims of nature to harvest a crop.

"We are trying to operate as long as we physically can," said Carpenter, conceding the plan may not work. "It will be an experiment on how low can we go and meet some deliveries."

What is just as unsettling is Lowe can't be sure there will be a third generation of Lowes on the home place.

Son Sean, 18, who graduated from high school this year, may decide the risks of farming are too great and follow his two older sisters into careers outside agriculture.

"He is a little nervous because of the water situation," Lowe said of his son's plans for the future. "The tribes and the ecologists want more water (for fish). That means there will be more years like this."

More years like this could doom even established farmers like Lowe, who left teaching at Kittitas High School in 1980 to grow timothy hay, a lucrative crop, plus sweet corn and oats on 350 acres. Mike Lowe, 34, farms the neighboring 350 acres his father started in 1947. The brothers work the two places together.

"Another year like this would make it pretty tough because the bankers know the situation, too," he said. "They are less likely to want to loan people money."

Lowe said he expects gross income for the farm this year will be down by 40 percent, slightly worse than 1994. Half the farm is fallow. The brothers have never had to do that before.

There is no sweet corn or oats because there isn't enough water. Both are good crops with which to rotate timothy to control weeds and cover annual farm costs.

The effects of this water shortage will linger into next year when Lowe expects yields will be off about a ton per acre from his more than four-ton average because he couldn't provide the crop the water it needed.

The shortage of water also puts him behind in reseeding new timothy fields, a practice that needs to be done about every five to seven years to keep Kentucky bluegrass from infesting the fields and reducing quality. It is another bow to the reality of the situation that will ripple through his balance sheet in the years to come even with adequate water.

The brothers have been fortunate. They have done well enough to be able to finance the farm from their own pockets, and haven't needed commercial operating loans. At least not yet.

Lowe did have to restructure his real estate debt this year to reduce the annual payment to a level he could afford. It's a short-term fix that will mean a longer repayment and more in interest.

Financial cares are pushed to the background for the time being. Harvest time has arrived.

Lowe greets visitors to his farm astride his Yamaha motorcycle on an early July afternoon.

But the motorcycle, which he uses to get around the farm to irrigate, will be of little use the rest of the summer. He is now out of water and must hope the hay fields will go dormant and not die from a lack of water.

There will be no second cutting.

"We used to figure the first cutting paid all your expenses. The second cutting was the gravy," the 50-year-old Lowe said. "There won't be any gravy this year."

Timothy is a major crop in the 59,000-acre district. The crop, highly prized as forage for race horses, is sold to Japan and the domestic horse-racing industry.

Lowe can point to a picture he received from his hay broker in Kentucky. The 1999 Kentucky Derby winner, Charismatic, dined on Lowe's timothy hay.

Good-quality timothy hay commands \$200 per ton, well above average prices for alfalfa hay. A smaller second cutting, harvested after Labor Day, usually sells for about \$120 per ton.

Alfalfa hay is selling for about \$130 per ton this year.

While Lowe has some inkling about his prospects, neighboring fruit grower Urban Eberhart won't know for several more weeks.

Eberhart, a longtime district director and one of the few fruit growers in a district where forage crops are king, hopes a drip irrigation system and supplemental well water will mean a crop this year.

He invested in the well and spent \$1,000 per acre on a drip irrigation system after the 1994 drought, banking that the investment would save his 300 acres of pears and apples in future droughts.

"I certainly hope to have a crop. You don't know until you actually get there," Eberhart said.

Hope and worry are constant companions for Kittitas Valley farmers these days.

There is worry about what next year holds and how the drought will affect businesses and residents in the closeknit Ellensburg community.

Lowe is faced with laying off his one hired hand. There won't be anything for the seven-year employee to do the rest of the summer. His harvest crew was smaller and earned less in wages than past years.

"We won't be buying a lot of new stuff. That will affect the local cycle shop. When I go in there they want to know how things are going. If we do well, he sells more cycles." said Lowe. "I know a furniture store had a big order the buyer backed out of. It's not just us who are affected."

Photos



SANDY SUMMERS/Yakima Herald-Republic

Bill Lowe, a Kittitas County hay grower, ponders his future as he struggles through the 2001 drought with smaller crops and less income to support a farm on which he and his wife have raised three children. The drought is the worst in history, with some farmers getting only 35 percent of the water they normally receive for irrigation.



SANDY SUMMERS/Yakima Herald-Republic

Bill Lowe cuts his hay out of a hillside of sagebrush and rattlesnakes. Despite a harsh natural environment, in a normal year he can get two cuttings of hay. This year, he'll get only one.