

## Water and drought

# Lake levels below normal

*Bureau still thinks 150,000 acre-feet can go to irrigators*

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From left, state Rep. Bill Garrard, R-Klamath Falls, Amy Amrhein of U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden's office and U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., listen Tuesday to federal agency officials talk about recent efforts in the Klamath Basin in getting water and aid to irrigators during the present water shortage.

Water levels in Upper Klamath Lake are now nearly two feet below where they need to be for water to be delivered to the Klamath Reclamation Project.

The news was announced Tuesday afternoon during a briefing with Republican Rep. Greg Walden at the Klamath County Government Center. Sue Fry, area manager for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, said she still thinks 150,000 acre-feet of water can be delivered to Project irrigators, but is concerned about when that could happen.

"The lake is just not filling the way we'd like to see," she said.

Other government officials talked to Walden and other federal and state lawmakers about what is being done as the region faces one of the worst droughts in decades.

Walden said he was pleased with the agencies' cooperation, but said he had concerns about the worsening availability of water and how producers could receive aid.

"The way the system works, you almost have to plant and expect a loss, but you can't do that under insurance guidelines," he said.

Upper Klamath Lake is at historic lows, with its water level more than a foot below where it was at this time last year. Precipitation and inflows to the lake also are below normal. Project irrigators are projected to receive about a third of their typical annual water deliveries as a result.

Tuesday's meeting was an opportunity for Walden and congressional staffers to hear updates on the region. Walden opened the meeting by reminding those attending what happened in 2001 when irrigation water was shut off, devastating the region.

"Hopefully agencies have learned from past experiences how important it is to work together," he said.

Agency officials had lots of information, but it wasn't necessarily positive.

**Low lake level**

Fry and Laurie Sada, project leader for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Klamath Falls, said a new biological opinion opened the possibility of water deliveries to irrigators, but even if it had been in place before now, the lake would still be too low.

Lynn Voight, state executive director for Farm Service Agency in Oregon, said that the U.S. Department of Agriculture would have to see a 30 percent loss in at least one commodity across the county to trigger some federal aid programs.

"Unfortunately, that's how the system works," he said.

**Insurance**

There was some good news.

Voight and other federal agricultural officials reported that roughly 75 percent of the region's acreage is covered by insurance. Workshops are being planned to help producers know what is available, including funding for cover crops and water conservation for next year.

"Beat on our doors," said David Ferguson of the USDA. "It's planning we need to do proactively and not wait until after the fact."

Those attending noted that the cooperative environment fostered by the process of creating the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement is keeping communication lines open. Jeff Mitchell, Klamath tribal council member, said that is what differentiates this situation from the 2001 water crisis.

"We can't lose sight of that; we have to keep moving forward," he said.

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