

# Water and Drought: Erosion fears

## *Klamath Basin farmers must decide soon whether to plant cash crops or cover crops*

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April 6, 2010

Dry, bare soil will erode this year if no crop is planted to hold it in place. That much is for sure.

Not much else is. Klamath Basin farmers are still wrestling with questions about cover crops, insurance, and most of all, water.

“It’s not every day, but it seems like you think you have everything figured out and then another questions arises,” said Mark Trotman of Baley-Trotman Farms.

Trotman has between 1,000 and 1,200 acres to protect from erosion. He’s leaning toward planting wheat, barley or rye in fields where he would have planted potatoes.

He is among Klamath Basin farmers and ranchers who face drought conditions this year.

Upper Klamath Lake levels are at historic lows and precipitation and inflow to the lake below normal levels. Irrigators on the Klamath Reclamation Project have been told the Bureau of Reclamation would only provide 150,000 acre-feet of water from the lake. That amount is about a third of what is typically delivered to the Project annually.

### **Drought declaration**

Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski issued a drought declaration for Klamath and its adjoining counties, and lawmakers also asked for federal declaration to help bring aid to the area.

Trotman signed up for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program or EQIP cover crop funding, but is waiting to from his insurance agent about whether planting will negate his coverage.

Great Basin Insurance agent Matt Hurley said producers are asking every question imaginable this year.

Some fields may be classified as highly erodible land, and will need a cover crop, he said. Other fields may be planted with a cover crop, but can't be harvested even if the crop grows well enough.

"As long as it's just a cover crop, it's supposed to leave their insurance intact," he said.

The EQIP Klamath Drought Initiative allows producers to harvest hay or use as forage whatever grows in the fields as long as stubble requirements are still met. Hurley said the Risk Management Agency has indicated if Klamath Basin farmers harvest the crop in any way, "All bets are off."

At the Oregon State University research station on Washburn Way, potato researcher Brian Charlton said last week's windstorms covered the windows in a film of soil from the potato field.

"You're at risk of losing some of your most productive soils," he said.

Topsoil is the most fertile soil in a field, Charlton said, and as a resource, it needs to be protected for future growing years.

### **What to plant**

EQIP funding is only approved for small grains like oats, wheat, barley, rye and triticale, but Charlton has researched green manure crops which could provide natural pest control while preventing erosion. The crops aren't harvested, and instead are left to decompose naturally.

Charlton said if he were faced with the choice of what to plant, he would probably lean toward a crop that may provide a saleable product.

"You're receiving the support dollars via EQIP to cover seed cost and actual cost of seeding the crop," he said. "Depending on the inherent soil moisture, it's possible to cut that crop for a cereal hay crop and that might provide some additional revenue."

Each day the wind blows, it takes a bit more of the moisture out of the soil.

Trotman said some soils will have enough latent moisture to germinate the seeds, while sandy soils may not be able to support any kind of crop without an early season water application. He has acquired land outside the Klamath Reclamation Project to replace some his potato acres, he said.

"We may have situations out there that we've got ground that's going to blow all year long," he said.

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