

# Tough year for Klamath farmers

## Drought offers slim irrigation promises

By [Kate Ramsayer](#) / *The Bulletin*

Published: May 10, 2010 4:00AM PST



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The Associated Press

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With water levels in Upper Klamath Lake at a record low, and the irrigation season projected to deliver only about a third of the normal water to farmers and ranchers, the Klamath Basin is preparing for a tough summer ahead.

“We’re scared to death,” said Steve Kandra, 57, a farmer in Merrill, near the California border. “We’re putting in crops, because we’re farmers, and there’s a part of it that’s optimistic, otherwise you would never plant a seed. But people are hedging.”

Upper Klamath Lake has less water in it this spring than it did in 2001. That year, the Bureau of Reclamation shut off water to irrigators to ensure salmon and sucker fish had enough water, sparking irrigator protests, rallies and a bucket brigade, which drew national attention to the basin.

In March of this year, the state of Oregon issued a drought declaration that allowed some in the Klamath area to start pumping groundwater. The federal government followed suit last week, issuing a disaster declaration that will bring additional funding to the area.

Many of the players involved say that while the drought could put some farmers out of business, they don’t anticipate the same level of contention as nine years ago.

And with new agreements and programs in place, including funds for idling farmland, farmers could get more assistance to make it through the summer.

“The federal agencies and the water users have been sitting down and talking, and trying to figure out ways to address the endangered species’ needs, as well as the irrigation needs,” said Tom Paul, deputy director of the Oregon Water Resources Department. “That’s something that did not happen in ’01, and I think you’re seeing a lot more cooperation to look for workable solutions.”

Wednesday, Upper Klamath Lake’s surface elevation was 4141.10 feet, said Kevin Moore, spokesman for the Bureau of Reclamation. The previous record low for that date was 4141.62 feet.

“We’re still setting records for the lowest the lake’s been,” Moore said. “The (water) storage in the lake is the lowest we’ve seen it, and the inflows are just not filling the lake like we’re used to.”

The Bureau of Reclamation said last week that it expects to release 150,000 acre feet of water at some point after May 15 — although it hasn’t said exactly when. That’s about 30 to 40 percent of the amount of water it usually releases, and more than a month and a half after the water typically starts flowing.

But the federal agency has to ensure that enough water is left in Upper Klamath Lake for the endangered shortnose suckers, and that enough water is released to the Klamath River for the coho salmon that swim downstream.

“During a drought year like we’re in now, it makes it a very challenging situation,” Moore said.

*No water for some*

For irrigators, it means that some people will not receive water this year, said Belinda Stewart, outreach coordinator with the Klamath Water Users Association.

“For some producers, this year will put them out of business,” she said. “There’s folks that are too small, or too new to farming to make it through this year.”

But the situation isn’t as dire as it was in 2001, she said. Irrigators, environmental groups, the Klamath Tribes and others have been working together over the past several years on the Klamath Restoration Agreement, signed earlier this year, which attempts to find solutions for both farmers and fish to get water.

For water users, the main thing it addresses is adding some certainty so that irrigators know at the beginning of the season how much water they will get, she said.

And through new agreements, she said, there are several programs set up to help farmers. Some irrigators are now allowed to pump groundwater during drought conditions, and another program pays farmers to not plant acres, saving the irrigation water for others.

Idling land “by no means makes up for what they’re losing from not planting,” Stewart said. “But it’s an option for some people that helps to at least pay some bills and hope to scrape by.”

And it gives water managers flexibility to try to solve problems, she said.

#### *Other options*

The Klamath Water and Power Agency is running the groundwater and idling programs. Executive Director Hollie Cannon said he hopes that groundwater — which can be used because of the state drought declaration — will provide about a third of the water that irrigators need this summer.

“We’re attempting to pump almost twice as much from groundwater as has been attempted (before),” he said. “We already know that it’s going to have a large impact on the aquifer. It’s a really tough decision here; it’s a really tough situation.

Groundwater could provide about a third of the necessary water, Cannon said. Irrigation water provides another third, but that still leaves a third of the acres normally irrigated without water.

With about \$3.5 million from the Bureau of Reclamation, the Klamath Water and Power Agency has paid farmers to let about 18,000 acres sit idle this summer, Cannon said. But probably between 50,000 and 70,000 acres will end up dry, he added.

The area is hoping to get more federal funds, but won’t know until July at the earliest if more money is coming.

“The problem is (that) right now is when the farmers are making decisions about whether to try to get some crops in or whether they should idle,” Cannon said. “It’s a really tough situation

because we need to know right now what's going to be paid to idle, and what's going to be irrigated.”

Kandra, a third-generation farmer who normally grows grain and alfalfa and has tenants who grow potatoes and onions, said that the situation is leading to a lot of uncertainty for farmers.

“Everybody is being what I call pretty conservative,” he said. “We’re trying to figure out the landscape.”

He has access to some groundwater, so is planning to not plant the grain he usually would and concentrate on the potatoes and onions, while cutting back about half of his alfalfa acres.

“And I’m anticipating that when I get into the summer, I won’t be able to irrigate the alfalfa because I’ll be saving my water for the onions and potatoes.”

He has a neighbor who is an onion grower who can’t be assured of water, so is instead farming 70 miles away in California to ensure he can grow what is necessary for his contract. Others are also moving operations outside of the Klamath Basin, Kandra said, renting farmland elsewhere so they can be sure they will have water available.

But there will still be people who won’t get water, he said. And young farmers with more debt, or old landowners who can’t rent out their farmland, are the most vulnerable, he said.

“We’re going to have some attrition,” Kandra said. “We had tremendous attrition in 2001, and we’re going to have some this year if we don’t get some help.”

Still, he said he doesn’t expect tensions to be as high as they were in 2001, because the federal agencies, tribes and organizations looking out for fish have been working with irrigators to find solutions.

“This year we’re all working together to find a solution,” he said. “The irrigators will be much better off this year than in 2001, because of the cooperation and the mutual interest for everyone to succeed.”

There could be tensions, however, between people who get water and those who don’t, he said, especially people who aren’t served by the irrigation districts.

### *Klamath vs. Deschutes*

While irrigators in the Klamath Basin prepare for a dry summer, the Deschutes Basin had a good April with rain and cooler temperatures that helped the snowpack stick around, said Kyle Gorman, regional manager with the Water Resources Department. While some irrigators will still have to rely on stored water from Wickiup and other reservoirs, they won’t have to drain it as much as previously predicted.

The Deschutes is different from the Klamath region because it has a bigger snowpack to draw from, he said, and this winter Klamath just seemed to miss out on most of the snowstorms and other weather patterns.

Also, the water rights in the Klamath have not yet been adjudicated, said Paul, with the Water Resources Department. So there isn't a clear sense of who has senior or junior water rights.

And while organizations, cities and irrigators in the Deschutes Basin have been working together for a while to restore stream flows, groups in the Klamath are just starting to work together, even though efforts like the Klamath Restoration Agreement are a step in the right direction, Paul said.

"It's really a different climate," he said.

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