

Filling contracts, planting crops, with or without water



H&N photo by Andrew Mariman Donnie Heaton, a Merrill-area potato and grain farmer, surveys a field outside Bonanza that he is renting this year to grow potatoes.

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It's about finding water. Donnie Heaton planted potatoes this year, but not in his usual fields. So did Dan Chin of Wong's Potatoes.

The dirt could produce a different looking potato, and producers like Heaton and Chin worry that buyers won't like it.

This year, farmers and ranchers on the Klamath Reclamation Project — 225,000 acres that includes lands south of Klamath Falls, in Tulelake, Calif., and east into the Langell and Poe valleys — will get one-third of their normal supply of irrigation water. Some will get none.

John Walker and his brother oversee a farming operation that includes 35 to 40 full-time and temporary employees.

"It's juggling," he says of finding fields with irrigation water. "You've got to be ready to change."

Lack of water also worries fishermen like Dave Bitts, who docks his boat in Eureka, Calif., and makes his living fishing salmon and crab.

Things aren't likely to change this season. Despite a wet spring, precipitation is still 81 percent of average, year to date, and Upper Klamath Lake is still more than a foot below its average surface elevation for this time of year.

Farmers, ranchers and others impacted by water in the Basin will have to cope. How they do so is part of our ongoing series, "Chronicles: Water and Drought."

New fields: Travel distance, water pumping and frost are among concerns of Merrill-area farmer

By Jill Aho
H&N Staff Writer
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Donnie Heaton, a Merrill-area farmer, inspects a field near Bonanza he is renting this year to grow potatoes. Water from a nearby well can be pumped to irrigate the crop.

BONANZA — Donnie Heaton surveys the Hildebrand-area field outside Bonanza, examining the rows where he plans to plant potatoes.

It's been 25 years since Heaton, 48, farmed this far from his home. This field, likely in hay last year, is surrounded by rocky, forested hillsides. "I never thought I'd be back here," he says.

The field has a well with a pump house at the bottom of its sloping brown mounds, and is one of several with well water outside the boundaries of the Klamath Reclamation Project that Heaton rented this year to produce his potato crop.

Crops on the land that Heaton normally would farm may get little irrigation water this year. Low lake levels and below-normal precipitation will force the Bureau of Reclamation to release about a third of the water it normally supplies Klamath Project irrigators.

Most years, Heaton plants between 600 and 1,000 acres, 50 acres of which is his land. This year, he'll have control of more land, and plans to plant grains on the acres within the Project, land that he might have planted potatoes some other year.

Heaton's rented fields are a nearly 100-mile round trip from his Tulelake potato shed, and even farther if he includes federal lease land in the Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuge. This will add to costs of farming this year.

"Fuel is starting to go up, and we're going to use a lot more of it," he says.

There is good news: cost for the ground this year is similar to the prices Heaton has paid in the past, and seed prices have declined since last year.

The rented Hildebrand-area field comes with challenges, and distance from the storage shed is just one of them. The land is at a higher elevation. It's colder there. Heaton will need to protect his crop from frost, a danger at any time in the Klamath Basin.

"It's good ground," Heaton says. "Everybody ought to get a good crop, but what should be everybody's main concern is frost protection."

Heaton also plans to experiment with planting a field he rented near Medford.

"I've been wanting to do it for the last three or four years," he says. "Change brings change."

He rented 100 acres there, of which he will plant 25 acres of potatoes. He expects them to be ready for harvest in August, shortly after his shed is emptied of his 2009 potato crop.

"I'm going to see how they do," he says. "It should help keep the packing shed going. If it works, you'll probably see a lot of people over there next year. Somebody's got to be the guinea pig."

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