

DAVE SOLEM, director, Klamath Irrigation District

Irrigation director hopes for best, prepares for the worst

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H&N photo by Andrew Mariman Dave Solem, director of the Klamath Irrigation District, says farmers must pay irrigation district fees even if they don't get water, putting a strain on already tight budgets.

Dave Solem has never seen a water shortage like this.

The director of the Klamath Irrigation District since 1983, Solem presided over drought years and water shortages caused in part by fish and wildlife regulations. But 2010 brings challenges he's never seen before.

"In the history of the Klamath (Reclamation) Project, we've never had to operate with a supply that looks like it's going to be about 30 percent of what we normally want to be able to divert, so we don't know how it's going to work," Solem says. "It's never been done before."

The irrigation district is responsible for overseeing the terms of the reclamation project in the Klamath Falls area, east to the Poe Valley and south toward Merrill and Malin.

Solem says around 500 farms and more farmers depend on water diverted from lakes, rivers and reservoirs for their livelihoods.

In a normal year, the canals that transport the water are filled up by April 15, and are turned off Oct. 15, making for a six-month irrigation season.

"We're starting a month late" this year, Solem says, "and we're talking about ending a month early. We're really talking about a four-month irrigation season" instead of six.

If the water is shut off in mid-September rather than October, farmers will have a third less time to grow crops this year.

Klamath Irrigation District does not use state or federal money, save for the occasional grant. The farmers who use irrigation water pay fees to the district to support its operating costs.

“If they have to pay the bills without any income of their own, that’s a big strain on them,” Solem says.

A little rain would go a long way to help prolong this year’s crop season, he adds. But while hoping for the best, he is preparing for the worst.

“We’re trying to solve the problems of an entire Basin,” he says.

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