

WATER AND DROUGHT IN THE KLAMATH BASIN

150,000 acre-feet should be available

Despite stable water supply, amount is less than is needed

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Gov. Ted Kulongoski, center, visits with Dick Carleton, left, and other farmers, agricultural business owners and local officials during a tour of farmland south of Klamath Falls Thursday.

Klamath Basin irrigators should be able to receive about 150,000 acre-feet of water from Upper Klamath Lake, the amount projected for a dry irrigation season.

Even though that water supply is stable, it is still far less than what irrigators need.

Recent wet and cool weather has helped the region's surface water supplies, Bureau of Reclamation officials told Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski Thursday. The governor was in the Basin to follow up on the region's water shortage and drought.

The drought forced Basin irrigators to idle thousands of acres, severely shorten the growing season and use valuable groundwater resources.

"It's not easy, and I know this is just the beginning of the process," Kulongoski said.

Lake levels

Bureau of Reclamation officials projected this spring it would only provide up to 150,000 acre-feet of water to the Klamath Reclamation Project because Upper Klamath Lake was at historic lows and precipitation and inflows have been below average.

“You have 25 square miles of a big evaporative pond,” said Jon Hicks, chief of the planning division for the Bureau’s local office, of the lake.

Upper Klamath Lake isn’t the only reservoir that is struggling. Hicks said the east side of the Project is facing a severe shortage because no irrigation water is coming from Clear Lake, which has received little inflow in the past two years.

Irrigators said they can’t not receive water this year and start up again when it is available. The most high value crops, such as peppermint and alfalfa, need water constantly through September. Those crops are also perennial, so if they go without water, the farmer loses heavily on his investment and has to start over.

“It isn’t a year-to-year decision on a lot of these crops,” said irrigator Tracy Liskey.

Late start to irrigation

Dave Solem, manager of Klamath Irrigation District, said additional pressure came from the fact that irrigators started roughly 40 days later than they typically would and are planning to not have surface water available for the last 30 days of the season.

The use of groundwater has helped ease the blow, but it also has made the process of getting water to irrigators more complex.

“Instead of two diversion points, I have a hundred,” Solem said.

Despite the problems, irrigators said they were glad to be receiving support from state and federal agencies.

Klamath County Commissioner John Elliott told the governor he appreciated his support for water storage projects, which could help alleviate future water shortages.

Kulongoski said great strides have been taken, but that he is still concerned, especially come August and September. More needs to be done to prevent similar situations into the future, he said.

“What we’re trying to do is build some certainty.”

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