

## Chronicles: WATER AND DROUGHT

### **‘We just try to make the necessary adjustments to stay in business’**

‘I DON’T PRETEND TO KNOW ABOUT FARMING, EXCEPT THOSE GUYS WORK THEIR BUTTS OFF TO KEEP THIS PART OF THE BASIN GOING.’ — Martin Hicks, owner Martin’s Food Center, Merrill

By JOEL ASCHBRENNER  
H&N Staff Reporter  
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H&N photos by Andrew Mariman Martin Hicks has owned and operated Martin’s Food Center in Merrill for 29 years and has seen his share of ups and downs due to both the economy and drought in the Klamath Basin.

MERRILL — Martin Hicks does not want to see a repeat of the drought that struck the Klamath Basin in 2001.

“It was miserable,” said Hicks, owner of Martin’s Food Center in Merrill.

That year, he had to take out a loan against his life insurance policy to keep his store in business. His customers, many of whom own or work on farms, were cutting back.

Hicks said this year’s water shortage, which has farmers and laborers cutting back, has hurt business too, but so has the cool weather, which has kept people from barbecuing. There also is new competition from a grocery store that opened in Malin.

The decrease in business forced him to cut full-time employees back to 32 hours a week. He’s trying to be proactive “We can’t wallow in self-pity,” he said. “We just try to make the necessary adjustments to stay in business, and hope we do the right things.”

Cashier Heidi Condon said she has seen customers cutting back. "Instead of going to Klamath Falls and buying a whole grocery cart full of stuff, they will just buy what they need here," she said. Rayna Hernandez, cashier and bookkeeper, said many farmers and farm workers who shop at the store say they are concerned with the drought and the cold weather that has kept crops from growing.

"I don't think they are panicking, because they've been through this before," Hernandez said.

The drought hit Merrill residents hard last week.

The city lost its domestic tap water supply early Wednesday when groundwater levels dropped 5 to 15 feet below the pipe that pumped well water into the city's water tank. Service was restored Friday.

"I think for the most part the community is trying to stay upbeat, but it's difficult," Hicks said.

Hicks said he thinks his store will be able to weather the drought, and he knows the farmers will.

"Of all the people I've known in my lifetime, I think farmers are the most resilient and the hardest working people," he said. "If they have any control over what happens to them, they will find a way to survive."

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