

Chronicles: WATER AND DROUGHT

‘With what I’m doing, I’m gambling a little bit more than I should be’

DONNIE HEATON, grows Background potatoes : and Heaton grains rented inside his and yrst outside ground the to farm Klamath when Reclamation he was 14. Project He now . In the 48, potato, grain spring, his yve-truck eet is busy hauling seed and fertilizer around the Klamath Basin. farmer, Merrill Family: He has one adult son, Drew, who lives in the area.

By JILL AHO
H&N Assistant Editor
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Donnie Heaton's phone is constantly ringing. The

Merrill area farmer gets or makes as many as 140 phone calls a day

It's the kind of year Donnie Heaton will remember. He'll remember the difficulties, the loyalties and what he can learn from it.

"The guys that do this ... It's a challenge. They like the challenge," he said. "This year's a bigger challenge."

That challenge surfaced in some unexpected ways, from a late frost that burned the edges of young Norkoda potato plants to long-time business partners who refused to extend credit.

"During a year like this, people remember," he said. "(In the future) you'll do business with the ones who did business with you."

The plants are late, water is rationed and Heaton's entire operation is spread out over many miles. Limited water deliveries to the lands he normally would farm have driven Heaton out of his usual Merrill-area fields, adding another element to an already challenging occupation in the Klamath Basin.

Heaton's 14 employees spend time driving instead of working, and must finish tasks the same day they are started.

As he drove the stretches of road that link his disjointed fields one muggy afternoon, Heaton assessed his neighbors' stands, the health of their plants, their techniques. He admitted there is some competition among the many potato farmers who have rented fields outside the Klamath Reclamation Project.



H&N photos by Jill Aho Bill Gasser, left, tested the moisture content of the mounds in one of Donnie Heaton's Bonanza-area potato fields last month. Heaton relies both on Gasser's machines and his own experience when it comes to irrigation.

In one frost-damaged field, Heaton's field man, Bill Gasser of Basin Fertilizer, caught up to him. The field produced a hay crop last year, and Heaton's carefully cultivated hills are partially made up of large clods of sod.

Heaton watched as Gasser dug into the mound, using a machine to test the moisture content inside. Heaton trusts himself a little more than Gasser's machine when it comes to water, but he described the relationship he has with Gasser as trusting and symbiotic.

"Knowing when to water, that's my deal," he said.

For Heaton, Gasser's knowledge and training are indispensable. Gasser helps to identify and control weeds, using his up-to-date knowledge about various inputs.

"He makes sure that we're doing things legal, as far as environmental stuff," Heaton said. "He tells me what he thinks I should do. I ask him."

The hills pass both Gasser's mechanical and Heaton's instinctual inspections.

Gasser said there wasn't much to be done about the hard clods of soil knotted together by the roots of last year's grass. Much of the ground out here has this challenge. When Heaton harvests this field, he'll be harvesting both potatoes and these inedible chunks of earth.

"You want to store potatoes," he said, adding it costs about 50 cents a sack to rent storage for potato crops. Soil clods just take up space.

Heaton also is fighting weeds that threaten to compete for moisture. One method he's been using, one he said is at least partly a gamble, is cultivating his fields once the plants have emerged.

"I don't like to cultivate until the plants are out of the ground," he said.

Cultivation allows Heaton to reduce weeds as they are turned under the soil and create straight and deep hills to cover his potato crop. Any potatoes exposed to the sun will turn green and be unmarketable. But, this has meant some of his fields were left vulnerable as he moved from one field to the next.

"With what I'm doing, I'm gambling a little bit more than I should be," he said.

Heaton's been waiting to put in irrigation equipment until the field has been cultivated, which leaves the young leaves unprotected from frost. Frost won't mar wet leaves, but can have devastating effects when allowed to settle in and freeze.

One of his fields did freeze. Luckily, the plants survived it well.

Side Bar

Farmer remains positive in face of new challenges

Merrill-area potato farmer Donnie Heaton was pleased with the progress of his fields.

After spending a sleepless night fighting with his baler as he finished his first cutting of hay, Heaton was checking on his Bonanza-area potato fields.

He spent the day driving from one field to the next. After catching mere minutes of shut-eye, his phone started ringing at about 6 a.m. It continued to sound every 20 minutes with another person seeking a decision from him.

Heaton said he once counted 145 calls in a day on his phone's log. It makes him wonder, if he had more time to consider the questions being asked, would he have made a different choice?

He drove with his knee while holding his phone in one hand and jotting down a figure from his hay harvest.

"I was pleasantly surprised by my tonnage of hay," he said. "This cutting (the bales) are over 1,480, almost 1,500 pounds."

Heaton was baling 3-foot-by-4-foot bales, which usually average about 1,250 to 1,300 pounds. This cutting was heavy with good leafy material, he said.

In the potato fields, the stands look good, despite some frost damage. He has hired help out in the fields setting up irrigation lines. He'll drive this route every two to three days this summer, piling up the miles on his temperamental pickup.

He's planted 25 acres of potatoes on the west side of the Cascades, and he has moisture sensors imbedded in the field, sending him information about this crop. He can operate that irrigation equipment remotely, but on much of this eastern, well-supplied land, he must use more labor-intensive methods of water application.

He'll be glad when all the piping for the solid set irrigation is laid.

"That always makes you feel good, when everything is up and running," he said.

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