

CHRONICLES: AN ONGOING SERIES

Water, drought and the next generation

By TY BEAVER
H&N Staff Reporter
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H&N photo by Lee Juillerat John Walker of Walker Brothers examines potato plants in one of his fields

Klamath Basin residents who rely on farming and ranching for economic survival are doing what they need to do to make it through this year's drought.

For Martin Hicks, that means cutting back employees' hours to match reduced demand from the farm and ranch families who shop at his Merrill grocery store.

For Bill Worthington, it means revamping his irrigation system to make it more efficient, and for potato farmers it means finding, planting and tending new fields that have access to well water.

Since irrigators found out they would get only a third of their normal water supply this season from Upper Klamath Lake, some have idled land, and others are using groundwater sources. Millions of federal aid dollars have flowed into the community, helping some more than others.

But there's some good news.

Federal officials said Friday that another 35,000 acre-feet of lake water could be provided to the Klamath Reclamation Project.

The good news has a price.

More water is available because of cool spring temperatures, which slowed down crop growth, putting the young plants at risk.

And the impacts of surviving this year's water shortage are beginning to show.

Intense groundwater pumping, expected to top 94,000 acre-feet this season, led to lower overall water levels in domestic wells. City of Merrill residents went without tap water for several days last week because the water level in its well dropped below the reach of its pump.

It will be hard, but the farming and ranching communities say they will survive. The question is whether the next generation is willing to take the same risks.

"My kids aren't coming back, so I want someone to still be around," said farmer and rancher Tracey Liskey, who is mentoring other young farmers.

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