

Planning for the long haul: Rancher reworks irrigation

BILL WORTHINGTON, owner, Grand View Angus Farms on the southern end of Poe Valley

By ELON GLUCKLICH
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H&N photo by Elon Glucklich Bill Worthington looks out over his cattle ranch in southern Poe Valley. Worthington says he knew after the 2001 drought that another would likely come. To prepare for future shortages, he updated his piping system, preventing leaks and making the most of his allotted supply.

Bill Worthington spent nine years preparing for a season like this.

When irrigation water in the Klamath Basin was shut off in 2001, he knew it would not be the last time the forces of nature stretched the resources of men.

“It made me realize the water situation in all of Klamath County was going to be something to look at for the long haul, not just a one-time thing,” said Worthington, owner of Grand View Angus Farms in southern Poe Valley.

So Worthington, who prides himself on thinking ahead, got proactive. He increased his well water use. He has more than 500 acres of land and waters 250 of those acres with sprinklers hooked up to his well system.

He also reworked his piping system, adding an extra mile of pipes and increasing the rate at which water flows into them.

With more than 100 head of cattle on his ranch, healthy grass is essential to keep their weight at healthy levels, and a comprehensive irrigation system is a must if his cows are to put on that weight.

“In a drought year, how many cattle can you run if you only have so much water?” Worthington said. “We recognized we had to do something.”

Paying closer attention to the early development of his cattle, coupled with diversifying his water flow, has allowed him to increase the size of his calves. When he began ranching here in 1983, his average calf weighed between 350 and 400 pounds. Now they weigh up to 680 pounds.

Without a steady flow of water into the Poe Valley's system of irrigation ditches this year, however, providing his calves the nourishment they need will still pose a challenge.

"Things aren't that easy here," Worthington said. "We just have to make do."

Side Bar

Below-average temps, lake levels a reason for optimism



DAVE SOLEM, manager, Klamath Irrigation District

Below-average temperatures in April and May turned into a blessing for area irrigators, said Dave Solem, district manager of the Klamath Irrigation District.

The temperatures minimized evaporation from Upper Klamath Lake. The cold also helped conserve groundwater used by irrigators during the month between the beginning of the season and May 12, when irrigation water started flowing.

“What we were concerned about was that they were going to have to rotate use of available water,” Solem said. “But the weather has been very favorable for a short supply.”

Lake levels also are a cause for optimism, Solem said.

About one-quarter of the Klamath Irrigation District’s water users will either tap groundwater from their wells or idle parts of their land, further mitigating demand amid what Solem called one of the three worst drought seasons since he arrived in the Basin in 1982.

The anxiety of a late start is multiplied by uncertainty about the end date for the water season, Solem added. Shutting water off in September rather than October — shortening the irrigation season from six months to four — is a very real prospect.

“There will be an impact to people by shutting off early,” he said. “We set the total demand we had to live with in order to make it through mid-September and not draw the lake down too quick.”

For Solem, projecting the year’s demand — much like setting a start and end date to the 2010 water season — has been an educated guessing game.

“It’s very hard to predict what the demand will be,” he said.

— Elon Glucklich

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