

Farmers, ranchers deal with the Basin's realities, and will survive

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Times are tough right now for farming and ranching.

So what's new? If your living is in any way related to agriculture, you've learned that some times are less tough, some times are more. Yet, that doesn't mean we're not all concerned about the current state of things. We're talking about friends and neighbors, after all; and we're talking about lots of operations making lots of changes and that means big impacts for the community.

We think it's worth considering the thoughts of those most involved. There's not a whole lot of ranting, but there's a modicum of philosophy involved in plain old business decisions and close-up vantage points.

Perspective. That's what we got from the last collection of vignettes of local agriculturists, in light of this year's water problems. We printed them in last Sunday's package, "Chronicles: Water and Drought." Here's a bulleted review:

- John Walker, co-owner of Walker Brothers Farms and Gold Dust Potato Processors, seems to routinely manage from crisis to crisis, some big, some smaller. This year's water challenges are just that: challenges that have to be met with new strategies.
- His business partner and brother, Bill Walker, wonders if there will be a few less farmers at the end of this water-lean year. That's a reality, too. And Bill's son, Weston, 27, acknowledges the challenges: "Tough year. Not having the water. Not doing the normal farms. Different soils. Tougher soils. And the weather hasn't cooperated." Still, farming and working with his family, he says, "is awesome."
- For Robert Rice, owner and sole worker for Rice Feed & Supply in Dairy, it's a year of stark reality. He can't cut back on labor costs, because he's the labor. He has to cut everything else to string along in a year when drought and land idling have meant a 60 percent drop in his business. He keeps lights turned off; he cuts his inventory.
- Matt Walter, farmer/rancher, says he's cut his irrigated acres. Water sources are as low as he's seen. He's managing by utilizing dryland farming techniques.
- It's harder for some businesses to adjust very quickly because of the big investments they have to make to serve their niche. Donnie Boyd, third generation owner of Floyd A. Boyd Co., has never considered doing anything else, he says. But the next generation is considering it. It's a business that has to have capital tied up in pricey machinery and parts, so when their customer base is hurting, they can't do much but hurt; and it gets scary.
- The next generation is on the minds of lots of folks, like Tracey Liskey, whose own son moved to Idaho to work as a diesel mechanic. Still, Liskey mentors area young farmers and ranchers. Farming and ranching will continue in some way or another.
- And doing with less is just the norm: Garrett Roseberry, ranching in the Bly area, expects vegetation to not be what it usually is, due to the shortage of water; so his cattle will likely weigh less. Just the way it is.
- T.J. Woodley of the Klamath Soil and Water Conservation District notes that the number of irrigators asking for help figuring out or seeking funding for new wells, fixing old ones or adding irrigation equipment has tripled or more this year. He's happy to do anything possible to help; what's possible is limited.
- There are a lot of realities to deal with. Donnie Heaton mentions it this way: "During a year like this, people remember. (In the future) you'll do business with the ones who did business with you." As much as anything, it seems, he's acknowledging working relationships with people he trusts who help him keep his operation running.

- Some people can't help what happens, but can't help feeling responsible for the effects. Water managers, for instance. Dave Solem, Klamath Irrigation District manager, really can't do much more than monitor water levels and decide when to turn water flows on and off. Yet, he's stuck with the knowledge that those decisions make monumental differences in the lives of his clients.

- Bill Worthington helps put it in perspective. He says he's been preparing for a year like this since the last one, when the water was shut off in 2001. He's increased well capacity, added and reworked piping. Things are never easy in his Poe Valley neighborhood, he said. "We just have to make do."

- And Martin Hicks, owner of Martin's Food Center in Merrill, has seen tough times before, like the drought of 2001 when he had to take a loan against his life insurance to keep his store open. He reminds us that wallowing in self-pity is useless; proactive measures, even when painful, are what you have to concentrate on.

And he provided us with probably the quote that best puts it all in a nutshell:

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

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