

Well worries, costly water

Merrill farmer among those paying thousands a month to pump from wells

By SARA HOTTMAN
H&N Staff Reporter
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Jim Carleton installed a 550-foot deep well in 2003 that is his property's only water source of water this year.

MERRILL — For the first time in five years, Jim Carleton of Carleton Farms is using his well to irrigate his pasture and crops.

Before this year, Carleton Farms had access to full deliveries of surface water from the A Canal for potatoes, grain, alfalfa and pasture. Now Carleton is paying about \$4,000 a month for electricity to pump groundwater from his well, about two miles north of Merrill.

Surface water is “cheaper by a significant amount,” he said.

As state and federal governments regulate which farmers receive surface water during this summer's drought, others are making do with a number of costly options — idling land, joining groundwater programs or pumping their own well water.

Paying the way

The thousands of dollars that Carleton pays to Pacific Power are on top of the Klamath Irrigation District fees, which pay for canal operation and maintenance, and the thousands of dollars to file for state-required drought permits to be able to pump his well water.

“You’re still required to pay district charges whether you get water or not,” Carleton said. “We’re incurring the same costs as every other year, we just have the additional cost of pumping water.”

Using groundwater instead of surface water also turned out to be costly in resources. When the city of Merrill’s water tank went dry at the first of the month, it was because more people — residents, as well as farmers and ranchers — were using groundwater, taxing the aquifer’s supply more than previous growing seasons.

To irrigate the nearly 2,000 acres of land he rents or owns, Carleton pumps water from his 550-foot well — the pump is at 80 feet — directly into a canal system that distributes water to land. He installed the well in 2003.

He started running the well in April with alfalfa crops. He’s currently in a “critical period,” where water is stretched over several crops, but at the beginning of August will be back in to a “comfort zone.”



H&N photos by Sara Hottman Jim Carleton adjusts his well’s pump speed. Carleton is one of many Basin-area farmers forced to rely on well water with the curtailment of water deliveries to the Klamath Reclamation Project

Dropping aquifer

Carleton said he’s somewhat concerned that groundwater will drop below the reach of his well before the end of his irrigating season, just more than two months away.

“Obviously it will have some impact (on groundwater levels) because it’s pumping out of the ground, but how much impact is yet to be determined,” he said.

Ultimately, adjusting his 101-year-old operation to a limited water supply will cost upward of an additional \$50,000.

“Cost is an issue, but it costs a lot more to do nothing,” he said.

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