

USDA Farm Service Agency County Drought Monitoring for 2005

(Data as of April 4, 2005)

Background: The USDA Farm Service Agency staffs offices in 26 county locations throughout the state. FSA employees interact with farmers and ranchers on a daily basis. During the 2005 drought situation, FSA county employees are sending reports to FSA State Executive Director Jim Fitzgerald who also chairs the USDA State Emergency Board. Information is shared between FSA and partner USDA agencies Washington Agricultural Statistics Service and the Risk Management Agency for reports. Information from all three agencies is compiled into this biweekly report. The report is sent to USDA agencies, the Washington State Department of Agriculture and Congressional offices.

Northeast (Ferry, Pend Oreille, Stevens)

After a dry winter, March brought rains to Northeast Washington. Producers are preparing for less than average hay crops. If drought continues, dryland producers will have short crops and irrigators will have fewer cuttings. The March rains are expected to improve spring pastures. Farmers have begun to work fields and fertilize but most are waiting for warmer weather.

East (Adams, Lincoln, Spokane, Whitman)

Intermittent rains fell in late March. Pastures are greening up but most producers haven't turned out livestock yet. Concern exists for livestock water on rangeland. Springs are dry and supplemental water may be needed during the grazing season. Most of the small grains and legumes have not yet been seeded. Some producers are changing planting plans due moisture conditions combined with crop insurance options and fuel and fertilizer costs. Producers are leaving more fields fallow or choosing peas, lentils and barley over spring wheat in the higher precipitation areas.

Winds in Adams County have robbed some of the surface moisture from the fields counteracting the benefit of the earlier rains. Mild weather in January and February has fruit blooming 12-15 days early in the irrigated portion of Adams County. Frost is a concern because of the early bloom.

In Lincoln County, rain showers in late March had producers asking for variances to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) seeding moratorium. The FSA Lincoln County Committee requested the Emergency Conservation Program. A fair percentage of new grass seedings have been seeded in Spokane County.

Southeast (Asotin, Columbia, Garfield, Walla Walla)

The drought in the southeastern counties is one of the worst since 1977. Although Columbia and Walla Walla counties received some rain in late March, Asotin and Garfield counties received very little. Many producers have decided not to plant spring

crops and those that have are planting 3-4 weeks early. Irrigators in Walla Walla County are faced with water rationing this year. The Gardena Farms Irrigation District was running at ½ of their normal diversion rate in late March. If conditions do not improve, water may be shut off completely nearly 3 months earlier than normal.

Springs and small streams have dried and stream flows in perennial streams are at levels normally seen in late summer causing concern for livestock watering. Rangeland is in poor to fair condition. Asotin and Garfield counties have requested to implement the Emergency Conservation Program. Garfield has also requested emergency haying and grazing of Conservation Reserve Program land.

South Central (Benton, Franklin, Grant, Kittitas, Klickitat, Yakima)

The greatest impacts of the drought may be felt in the Yakima Basin where the Bureau of Reclamation predicts junior water rights holders may receive 15%-35% of their normal amount of water. Water for irrigation depends on the snowpack which increased by 8% at the end of March bringing it to about 26% of normal. The Benton, Roza and Kennewick Irrigation Districts serve about 60,000 acres. They are projecting that they will receive 30% of normal water for the irrigation season. According to these irrigation districts, the percentage of permanent crops range from 65%-75%, which include cherries, apples, grapes and stone fruit. The Roza Irrigation District (27,305 acres) shut water off April 5, the earliest ever. They will turn it on again in May for two weeks and then again each month through August, if sustainable. Amounts will be about 2.0 gallons per minute compared to normal at 7.9 gallons per minute. The Sunnyside, Yakima-Tieton (27,271 acres with junior water rights) and Wapato (68,000 acres of junior water rights) Irrigation Districts also include junior water rights holders who will be impacted by the lower water supply. Producers with senior water rights are scheduled to receive a full supply of water. Many producers have informed the Benton County FSA staff that if they are able to water, they will have to buy new pumps to be able to adjust to the abnormal amount of water supply. Producers who irrigate from the Columbia can expect normal water supplies. If the weather continues to stay cool and wet, water deliveries of the Kittitas Reclamation District, the largest in Kittitas County, may stretch into the first week of August. The Klickitat County Water Board is encouraging irrigators in Klickitat County not to water.

Grant, Klickitat and Kittitas counties reported heavy rains at the end of March. Spring precipitation has been less than normal in other south central counties and daytime temperatures higher than normal. The higher daytime temperatures early in the season have fruit producers concerned about night time frost. Wind has also reduced some of the benefit of the rain on dryland crop acres.

The dry conditions have stressed pastures in the south central counties. Some cattlemen have indicated that they will have to haul water or develop water sources. Rains have improved pastures in Grant and Kittitas counties. Klickitat County has been in a drought situation since 1999 and the rangeland has not fully recovered. Winter wheat looks good.

Benton, Kittitas, Klickitat, and Yakima counties have all requested approval to administer the Emergency Conservation Program. Klickitat also requested emergency haying and grazing of Conservation Reserve Program land.

North Central (Chelan, Douglas, Okanogan)

Drought conditions continue in Chelan and Douglas counties. They did not receive much precipitation in late March and did get winds with the precipitation that did occur.

Okanogan County received rains that helped improve pasture conditions but conditions in all three counties are below normal. No spring grains have been planted. Winter wheat is stressed due to the dry conditions.

Irrigation water will be short in the Entiat, Wenatchee Heights, Stemilt, and Squilchuck areas. Water should be adequate for senior water right holders who irrigate out of the Columbia River and Lake Chelan.

Several lakes and wells in northern Douglas County are dry and livestock producers are hauling water. Many report water supplies in spring pastures are none existent. The County Committees for Chelan and Douglas counties have requested the Emergency Conservation Program.

Okanogan County fruit growers are concerned about frost since the trees bloomed about 2 weeks early. No reports of frost damage have been received yet.

Northwest (Island, San Juan, Skagit, Snohomish, Whatcom)

Late March and early April rains have considerably reduced drought concerns in the northwest counties. Producers have begun to plant spring crops. Producers do not seem concerned about prevented planting due to drought.

Olympic Peninsula/So. Puget Sound (Clallam, Grays Harbor, Jefferson, King, Kitsap, Lewis, Mason, Pacific, Pierce, Thurston)

Producers have been out in the fields 2-3 weeks earlier than normal due to the drier than normal weather in early March. Heavy rains later in March and early April have eased concerns about drought and instead have prevented producers from working in the fields.

Lower Columbia (Clark, Cowlitz, Skamania, Wahkiakum)

After a dry winter, late March and early April rains eased drought concerns considerably for pasture and hayland. It is too early to determine how the fruit and berry crops fared. Many were prematurely blooming at the time of the heavy rains.