

WATER



Capital Press
EMPOWERING PRODUCERS OF FOOD & FIBER

OCTOBER 24, 2025

Big water year needed in parts of Idaho

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

The potential end to prolonged drought in northern Idaho contrasts with unusually low reservoir volumes in east and south-central regions.

“We are hoping drought will end in the north and are expecting drought to continue in eastern Idaho,” said David Hoekema, hydrologist with the Idaho Department of Water Resources.

The current weak La Nina weather pattern bodes well for north Idaho breaking out of a drought that has persisted for three straight years, he said. Weak La Ninas over the years generally brought wetter conditions to the north but both wet and dry conditions to the state’s south region.

Precipitation was around normal or wetter than normal in most of the state Oct. 1-13, Hoekema said. The new water year started Oct. 1. October 2024 was drier than usual.

“It’s nice to see wet conditions,” he said. Good moisture in the fall “helps recover soil moisture, and you tend to have more efficient runoff” come spring.

“We still need spring precipitation ... really a factor in how much water supply we end up with,” Hoekema said.

In water year 2024-25, snowpack as of April 1 was just below the long-term median in the north, 110-120% in the southwest and close to normal statewide. But subsequent dry conditions — the April-June period was the fifth-driest on record, he said — reduced streamflows and increased irrigation demand.

In southeast Idaho, conditions challenged some growers based on their crop mixes and limited Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer recharge opportunities, said Adam Young,

a Blackfoot-area grower of wheat, barley and some alfalfa hay.

He irrigated fewer acres than his groundwater rights allowed, drying up some small, hard-to-water corner areas to focus supply where it could be used most efficiently.

“It was a challenging water year,” Young said. “It was so hot and so dry for so long.”

Overall, the Idaho growing season was the warmest on record, according to University of Oregon and University of Idaho data.

The season brought the coolest July in five years, though temperatures for that month remained above normal, Hoekema said. September was exceptionally warm, particularly in the north.

As for irrigation demand, “summer moderated a little bit, especially in southern and eastern Idaho,” he said. “We ended up with above-normal precipitation in most of southern Idaho in August and September. That really tamped down some of the irrigation demand and allowed us to finish the irrigation season without too many shortages.”

But reservoir volumes were depleted by season’s end in east and south-central regions.

“Reservoir carryover in the Upper Snake is of most concern,” Hoekema said. “If we have a normal water year as far as snowpack and precipitation goes, I would still expect some water shortages because the reservoirs are so depleted.”

Drought in the south and east did not heavily impact irrigated agriculture in the 2024-25 water year due to carryover storage, “but this year, we are starting with very little carryover,” he said. “So we will need above normal snowpack in the mountains to recover.”

Combined storage volume in Reclamation’s system of seven Upper Snake River reservoirs



Idaho Department of Water Resources hydrologist David Hoekema. (Courtesy David Hoekema)

was 869,310 acre-feet going into the new water year, 21% full and 57% of average for Oct. 1, said Brian Stevens, water operations supervisory civil engineer with the bureau’s Upper Snake Field Office in Heyburn, Idaho. On Sept. 30, water year 2025 ended with the 11th lowest systemwide storage in

35 years.

“It is uncommon in years following water years like 2025 to see runoff in the system that could not be stored,” he said. For such flood-control operations to occur, “we would need water-year-to-date precipitation levels to be on the order of at least 120% of aver-

age in the April through June time-frame. With base flows as low as they are systemwide, we would need very wet conditions in water year 2026 for this potential to develop.”

Reservoir levels in the state’s southwest region are around normal, IDWR’s Hoekema said.



Oregon State University

College of Agricultural Sciences



GROW WITH US

The Founding College of OSU

Since 1868, we have served as the engine driving discovery, industry, and education—empowering ANYONE to grow into their fullest potential.

Choose from 40+ Degree Programs

Hands-On Learning with Global Opportunities

\$900K+ in Scholarships + Flexible Pathways Built for You!

Degrees that pay. Careers that matter.

The College of Agricultural Sciences offers educational opportunities for virtually endless career paths. Browse over 40 degree programs, many of which offer options for specialization. Take your education to the next level with one of our graduate degrees. Or, broaden your skillset by completing a graduate certificate. Whether you want to pursue your degree **remotely** or at one of our four campuses in **Corvallis, Bend, La Grande, or Newport**—find your next path forward here.



agsci.oregonstate.edu

Oregon has ‘pretty good’ water year in contrast to its neighbors

By **KYLE ODEGARD**
Capital Press

Oregon didn't face many water supply problems this water year — which runs from October through September — despite a dry spring progressing into drought during summer for much of the state.

“The impacts weren't quite so bad and the reason for that was really good winter precipitation and snowpack,” said Larry O'Neill, Oregon state climatologist and Oregon State University associate professor.

“Overall, it's a pretty good water year for the most part,” O'Neill said.

The Beaver State's water situation is a stark contrast to the Yakima Basin, Central Washington overall and Northern Idaho, he added.

Still, Oregon has quite a few reservoirs with lower than normal carryovers, including in Northeast Oregon and the Willamette Valley.

“It's not a major concern at this point, but if it stays like that through January, we'll be increasingly concerned that the effects of the drought will continue into next year,” O'Neill said.

Oregon declared drought emergencies for eight counties throughout the state this summer.

Areas of the valley and the Coast Range saw record low streamflows and coastal communities such as Newport and Lincoln City experienced voluntary restrictions to keep the water supply going.

“Usually the Coast Range fares better in drought conditions. This year was probably the worst that we have seen,” O'Neill said.

He's optimistic for 2026 thanks to a weak La Nina in the long term forecast, which brings a slight potential for a bit cooler and wetter than normal conditions.

An average to above average winter in terms of precipitation and snowpack would ease worries.

A complicating factor is deep drawdowns in the Willamette



A Central Oregon irrigation canal. Several reservoirs in Central and Southeast Oregon have ample carryover this fall, and the Klamath Basin, which has massive irrigation demand, also is doing well. (Courtesy Oregon Department of Agriculture)

Project to help native salmon, making those reservoirs more reliant on winter precipitation on a year-by-year basis.

However, reservoir levels can be lower than normal in the Willamette Basin and still meet irrigation, municipal and streamflow requirements.

O'Neill said there was plenty of good news for Oregon reservoirs in some regions.

Several reservoirs in Central

and Southeast Oregon have ample carryover, including Owyhee, Warm Springs, Billy Creek, Prineville and Ochocos reservoirs, he said.

“In a stunning reversal, Wickiup is even doing very well. ... This is really welcome news for Central Oregon,” O'Neill added.

Wickiup Reservoir, on the Deschutes River, has had little carryover since the drought of 2020.

The Klamath Basin, which has

massive irrigation demand, also is doing well.

Storms from Oct. 10-12 dropped snow on mountain ranges but were so early in the fall it probably doesn't mean much for the snowpack or prospects of a great ski season.

The storms brought no significant change to the U.S. Drought Monitor's data for Oct. 14, however.

Nearly 1.4% of Oregon

remained in extreme drought, 18%, in severe drought, 24% in moderate drought and 17% was abnormally dry.

While precipitation amounts in the Cascades and other regions weren't eye-popping, the storm was beneficial, O'Neill said.

“We need more to improve drought conditions, but this is a great start. You can't imagine a better start to the water year,” he added.

Washington water year cut into irrigation allotments

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

Washington's water year was dry and hot and its effects may linger far into the new water year.

The Washington State Climate Office calculates the water year — Oct. 1, 2024, to Sept. 30, 2025 — was the 37th driest and four warmest on record. Records date back to 1895.

The year was capped by what may have been the state's warmest September ever. Confirmation will have to wait until the federal government shutdown ends and the National Centers for Environmental Information posts the official numbers.

“Hopefully, we'll find out for certain once the government reopens,” Assistant State Climatologist Karin Bumbaco said.

Washington was stuck with a string of spring, summer and fall months with below-average rain. It ended the water year receiving 89% of its normal precipitation, according to the state office. Washington had its sixth-driest January on record, according to national weather records.

The Yakima River basin in Central Washington was especially hard hit. Irrigators depend on five reservoirs filling up with 1 million acre feet of rain and



A stump stands high and dry in a channel of the Coweeman River in southwest Washington in mid-October. Washington's water year was drier and much warmer than normal. (Don Jenkins/Capital Press)

melting snow. Reservoirs peaked below that and irrigators were short of water all season.

“All eyes were there,” said John Stuhlmiller, executive director of the Washington State Water Resources Association, which represents agricultural water suppliers.

The Roza Irrigation District and Kittitas Reclamation District were cut back to 40% of their full allotments. The districts are always cut back in water-short years because they have junior water rights.

But even irrigators with senior water rights were eventually cut off. The

Washington Department of Ecology prohibited withdrawing surface water in the Yakima River basin beginning Oct. 6.

The only exception was the Wapato Irrigation Project that serves the Yakama Nation reservation. The project has the oldest water rights in the basin, dat-

ing back to the 1855 treaty between the tribe and U.S. government. Even without an order, the project ended deliveries early because of the water shortage.

The curtailment of senior water-right holders was almost unprecedented, Stuhlmiller said. “The cut-back of the seniors is a big deal,” he said.

The five reservoirs, operated by the Bureau of Reclamation, ended the irrigation season nearly empty. That means they will need more rain and snow than usual to fill up. If they don't fill, the basin will be short of water next year.

A La Nina has formed, which tilts the odds in favor of a wet and cold winter. The La Nina, however, is expected to be a weak one.

Also, a mass of warm water off the West Coast may rob the La Nina of some of its punch, former Washington state climatologist Nick Bond said.

All of Washington is abnormally dry, with 96% of the state in some stage of drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

LEE'S DIESEL & MOBILE REPAIR, LLC
Rickreall, OR • 541-936-9146 • www.leasediesel.com

Pivot & Linear Irrigation Systems
Parts & Service - All Electric Machines, Diesel Engines & Generators

GPS Guidance Systems
Submersible & Line-Shaft Turbine Pumps, VFD's

Deutz Linear Engine Timing Belts
Replace every 5 Years or 4500 hrs

Lima Generator Bearing and Cap
New Engines: Isuzu, FPT, Perkins & Others

Best Prices on Irrigation Supplies

IrrigationKing.com

Sprinklers • Rain Guns
Drip Tape • Dripline • Filters • Poly Hose
Lay Flat Hose • Micro • Valves • Air Vents
Fertilizer Injectors ...and much more!

Fast & Free Shipping from Oregon
1-844-259-0640
www.irrigationking.com

10% OFF
PROMO CODE:
CAP10

5278811-1

Relationships Beyond Lending

HARVEST CAPITAL COMPANY, LLC
d/b/a Harvest Capital Company of America, LLC in AZ, CA, ID, MT, NE, UT, and WA
DEDICATED TO THE BUSINESS OF AGRICULTURE

Long Term Real Estate Lending for Agriculture

Give us a call at:
(503) 263-6616

207 SW 1st Ave Suite 105 | Canby, OR 97013 **HARVCAP.COM** |

Terms and conditions apply. Financing offered in connection with Farmer Mac and our underwriting partners, and is available only where Harvest Capital Company, LLC is licensed. To qualify, a borrower must meet the underwriting requirements and all credit is subject to approval. Interest rates and fees will vary depending on your individual situation. Not all applicants will qualify. NMLS No. 2237848

Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer recharge operations start

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

The Idaho Water Resource Board started annual Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer recharge operations Oct. 18.

The board since 2014 has returned water to the aquifer between irrigation seasons. The effort typically continues into late March depending on water supply conditions and when irrigation companies need to get their systems up and running for the crop season.

Given water volume stored in the Upper Snake River reservoir system, “it’s not looking promising for excess water in the spring for recharge,” said Wesley Hipke, recharge program manager for the board.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation’s system of seven Upper Snake reservoirs was 21% full as of Oct. 8, 56% of the 30-year average, according to Reclamation officials in the region. Below-average base flows are a key factor. A year earlier, the system was 40% full.

Aquifer recharge activity and volume are “dependent on Mother Nature,” Hipke



Milepost 31 Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer recharge site near Eden. (Courtesy Idaho Water Resource Board)

said. “Currently it’s going to take a really good snowpack to fill the reservoir system. It would have to be an exceptional year to have more water to recharge in the spring.”

The Idaho Legislature in 2025 increased the annual recharge volume target to 350,000 acre-feet, from the previous 250,000. The program’s 10-year average is just over 250,000.

In 2024-25, the board returned about 128,000 acre-feet to the aquifer, Hipke said. The board chose not to divert the full amount, and instead let some go past Milner Dam

for other uses.

Maximum recharge is about 150,000 in the October-March period given minimum winter flows, he said. Volume can increase later in spring if flood-con-

trol releases occur — in years when snowpack is high.

“The recharge program has to capture as much water as it can in those high-water years to reach that goal of having an average of 350,000 acre-feet per year,” Hipke said. IWRB is continuing to expand recharge capacity, particularly in the Upper Snake.

Participating canal and irrigation entities deliver water to off-canal recharge sites and receive a conveyance fee per acre-foot. The board last summer approved a flat fee. Previously, fees varied based on where and when recharge occurred.

Current partners for the 2024-25 recharge program are North Side and Twin Falls canal companies and Southwest Irrigation District, Hipke said.

The level of the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer has dropped over the past several decades for reasons including drought, growth and development, and efficient irrigation systems that return less water. The aquifer lies underneath much of southeast and south-central Idaho.

Ridenbaugh Canal diversion project begins

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

The Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District in mid-October started work to modernize the Ridenbaugh Canal diversion dam on the Boise River.

Increasing reliability, efficiency and safety are among goals of the project, slated to be completed before the 2027 irrigation season, officials said at a groundbreaking ceremony in east Boise Oct. 14.

Cost is about \$20.9 million, according to the Idaho Water Resource Board. Funding includes \$10.4 million from the board and a \$4.7 million U.S. Bureau of Reclamation WaterSmart grant.

The early 1930s structure is used to raise the upstream water level so water can be diverted into the canal. Operating the diversion requires manual installation, adjustment and removal of groups of 20-foot-long check boards.

Project plans call for replacing the check boards with two 40-foot crest gates and an 80-foot weir stretching across the river, according to information from IWRB and district officials. Automation will allow for quick adjustment of gate heights based on changes in river flows.

The automated gates are designed to allow for better response to and management of flood-flow condi-

tions, which can make the current diversion inaccessible. Gates are designed to be lowered quickly during high flows to reduce flood risks and impacts, pass debris and limit excess flow diverted into the canal.

Other planned work includes replacing most of the 550-foot sediment control structure and catwalk; replacing the weed rack with a system that manages debris mechanically and reduces the number of fish that can move from the river into the canal system; installing automated water measurement and telemetry; and installing electrical and mechanical systems to operate the new structure.

Reduced losses from seepage and over-delivery are among targeted benefits, officials said.

The Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District delivers water to about 69,000 acres, including about 46,000 acres of farmland.

Ridenbaugh Canal anchors the district’s system, which comprises about 500 miles of canals and drains and is the second largest in Ada and Canyon counties. The system also conveys water to three other districts and to Reclamation special contract lands.

The district delivers to more residential properties as growth and urbanization have continued, NMID capital projects manager Greg Curtis said. In designing the diversion dam, the district

and partners aimed in part to “end up with another system that lasts 100 years, like this one.”

The project not only replaces worn infrastructure, but also improves safety and efficiency — to the benefit many people, Gov. Brad Little said.

Little and the legislature in recent years spent more on water systems, including on repairing or replacing infrastructure. The Water Resource Board walks a fine line, prioritizing water supply and infrastructure and “investing the money where it does the most good,” he said.

“We want projects like this,” said board member Brian Olmstead.

The Ridenbaugh system is important to the Treasure Valley economy and has larger benefits, he said.

“There’s not a happy future for Idaho if we don’t take care of this water resource,” Olmstead said. Ridenbaugh and other key projects “are the future of the state of Idaho.”

The Ridenbaugh diversion dam modernization will pay off for many decades, said Roland Springer, Reclamation acting regional director.

“All of us want to preserve the great agriculture economy of the state of Idaho,” he said.

The project also highlights the national importance of water infrastructure, Springer said.



Part of the existing Ridenbaugh Canal diversion dam on the Boise River in east Boise Oct. 14, 2025. (Brad Carlson/Capital Press)

CapitalPress.com

Your source for agriculture and natural resources news

From Trailers to Tanks – We’ve Got You Covered

JTI SUPPLY
TANKS • PUMPS • COMPONENTS

JTI Supply provides the complete water system build for portable trailers, including durable tanks, reliable pumps, hoses, and fittings. Whether you need a custom setup or a standard build, JTI Supply has the inventory and experience to deliver dependable solutions that keep your water moving where you need it.

31989 Cinema Way, Tangent, OR
541-928-2937 • jtisupply.com

Diamond K Sales

DIAMOND K SALES
TRAILERS
PORTABLE WATER SYSTEMS

Diamond K Sales supplies the trailers that serve as the foundation for portable water trailers. Partnering with JTI Supply, Diamond K provides rugged, high-quality trailers designed to handle tough ag and industrial jobs. Together, we deliver complete portable water trailer solutions built to last.

Your All Service Dealer – Halsey, OR
541-953-7548 • 541-740-5133
diamondksales.com

Complete Portable Water Trailer Solutions – Built Strong, Built Together.

'Minimal disruption' so far for Odessa landowners in wake of shutdown

Capital Press staff

The federal government shutdown, so far, has caused "minimal disruptions" for Eastern Washington landowners working to replace declining well water with surface water from the Columbia River under the Odessa Groundwater Replacement Project.

"Thankfully, construction is able to continue through the shutdown," said Kristina Ribellia, executive director of the Columbia Basin Conservation District.

The shutdown interrupted USDA Natural Resources Con-

servation Service payments to landowners.

"Thankfully, we only have a few that are currently waiting for payments," Ribellia said. "We don't have a lot of landowners waiting."

Suspended routine operations The shutdown suspended routine operations for agencies managing Columbia Basin Project-related programs, the Columbia Basin Development League said in a recent update to its members.

The Bureau of Reclamation continues essential dam operations and water delivery system,

but has paused administrative functions.

Nearly 50% of the USDA workforce is furloughed, more than 42,000 employees. NRCS is "particularly impacted" with 95% of 11,000 employees furloughed.

"For Columbia Basin producers, this means suspended access to conservation planning services, practice designed assistance and implementation support for water efficiency improvements and soil health programs critical to sustainable agricultural operations in the region," the league update

stated. "While agencies will resume normal operations once appropriations are restored, accumulated backlogs in applications, payments and technical assistance requests will require time to process."

Open application period

Applications for NRCS's On-farm, WaterSmart and EQIP programs close Oct. 23. The conservation district assists and encourages landowners to apply even with the shutdown, as a placeholder, Ribellia said.

NRCS's watershed planning

activities, known as PL-566 for Public Law 566, paused due to the shutdown.

"I would consider these minimal disruptions, considering the fact that NRCS staff have been furloughed and (are) unavailable," Ribellia said. "I think we're in a fairly good place; our landowners and producers are in a good place, considering."

If the shutdown lasts longer than two or three months, "that's when it could become problematic, in starting to stall development or implementation for on-farm work," she said.

Harney basin faces competing regulatory strategies

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Competing regulatory proposals in Oregon's Harney basin are requiring state water regulators to choose between minimizing either groundwater depletion or economic disruption in the region.

Proponents of a plan developed by the state government are asking the Oregon Water Resources Commission to prioritize stabilizing the basin's declining aquifer levels, claiming the proposal already contains enough concessions for irrigators.

Advocates for an alternative regulatory strategy are urging the commission to adopt less stringent irrigation restrictions, arguing groundwater depletion can still be curbed with less economic fallout in the agriculturally-dependent Harney County.

"We need time to reinvent ourselves," said Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, who is promoting the alternative plan for regulating Harney basin groundwater.

Owens and other supporters of the alternative strategy recently told commission members they're facing the most consequential decision they'll likely make as regulators.

If the commission votes



A center pivot in the Harney Basin. Stakeholders are working to save agriculture in the region. (Capital Press file photo)

later this year to enact the original plan proposed by the state government, it's likely to result in lost jobs, bankruptcies and other financial effects that reverberate throughout Harney County, according to advocates for the alternative strategy.

Supporters of this alternative proposal, which was formally submitted as a petition to the commission last month, argue it makes more sense to adopt more targeted regulations focusing on areas with the most severe groundwater depletion.

"Only 10% of this basin has evidence of excessive declines," Owens said. "We ask you to work with this

community."

Restrictions on irrigation in the Harney basin have been mulled by state water regulators for over a decade, since agricultural pumping was determined to have exceeded natural aquifer recharge in the region.

The Oregon Water Resources Department, which is overseen by the commission, wants to implement a "critical groundwater area" that would mandate pumping reductions across the basin by up to 75% over the next 30 years.

Critics of OWRD's plan have submitted a petition that would reduce groundwater use by up to 54% in

specific locations with the largest drop in aquifer levels, but would rely on voluntary cutbacks in most of the basin.

During his recent testimony before the commission, Owens signaled that proponents of the alternative plan are willing to compromise on a solution if the OWRD will continue negotiating the regulations.

"Maybe we don't have everything right. We didn't expect to get everything right the first time," Owens said. "Please instruct the department to work with our community."

In discussing the competing proposals, the OWRD

pointed to the results of technical evaluation of each plan, which determined that both would improve the basin's groundwater situation compared to current rates of depletion.

However, supporters of the OWRD's strategy said that roughly 90% of the basin's wells would still be experiencing groundwater declines roughly three decades from now under the alternative proposal, compared to fewer than 50% under the agency's plan.

"By itself, the petition appears to be insufficient to achieve long-term stability in the Harney basin," said Zach Freed, a hydrolo-

gist with the Nature Conservancy nonprofit.

Environmental groups that support OWRD's proposal also said the alternative petition was evaluated based on the best-case scenario, under which voluntary irrigation reductions are able to meaningfully reduce the rates of aquifer decline.

As those irrigation cutbacks would be voluntary, though, there's no guarantee they'll be as effective as predicted, according to supporters of OWRD's strategy — which itself doesn't preclude voluntary measures.

Under the OWRD's plan, mandatory irrigation restrictions could still be eased if those voluntary steps have a substantial impact, Freed said. "It would say: Great, you've done it, no additional regulations needed."

Still, some supporters of the OWRD's plan said they'd be open to incorporating certain elements of the alternative strategy into the agency's proposal, such as exempting water rights owned by municipalities and the Burns Paiute Tribe from regulation.

Members of the commission asked questions but largely refrained from suggesting a preference for one plan over the other during a recent meeting, noting only that they expect to make a decision this December.

We know ag financing like you know work-life balance.

For over a century we've supported the people who are the heart of ag. You deserve a financial partner who works as hard as you do.

AgWestFC.com

AgWest
FARM CREDIT

Equal Housing Lender
This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer.