

Seattle Times

Yakima farmers say mismanaged water made crop losses much worse

Originally published September 8, 2015

Farmers in the Yakima basin say the mismanagement of water flows added to an already tough year when they were coping with a drought.

By Hal Bernton

Seattle Times staff reporter

Some Yakima basin farmers whose crops were stunted by drought this year say their problems have been aggravated by mismanagement of water flows from the Wapato Irrigation Project.

Farmers say that project officials sent too much water through the irrigation system during the spring season when there was scant demand. Then, during the peak summer months, shortages were so severe that farmers stole water from one another, the critics said.

Now, as the growing season nears an end and demand for water once again declines, Wapato officials announced they would boost September flows by 20 percent over earlier forecasts.

This month, there has been so much water in the system, that some has flushed back into the Yakima River because farmers don't need it on their fields, according to Tim Dennis, an agronomist with Calaway Company, which farms 3,000 acres of silage corn, hay and other crops in the Wapato district.

"It's September. It's harvest time," Dennis said. "For all intents and purposes the (growing) season is over."

Dennis estimates that Calaway lost about 30 percent of its crops on the Wapato this summer due to a lack of water during the height of the growing season.

Larry Nelson, Wapato's irrigation-systems manager, said the water was allocated based on the best available information.

"There's no perfect science to this," Nelson said. "I don't have a magic crystal ball in front of me."

The Wapato, which was formed in 1904, is the largest irrigation project in the Yakima basin and is run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). It has a troubled history that includes a \$138 million backlog in maintenance and, over the years, an erosion of trust by farmers toward the BIA leadership.

The project receives an annual water allocation from the federal Bureau of Reclamation. Then it's up to Wapato officials to decide how to divide that water through the growing season, when project canals are lifelines that irrigate more than 120,000 acres of farm land on the Yakama Indian Reservation.

In drought years, water management is a big issue as irrigators seek to have the reduced supplies available when they can do the most good.

Nelson said Wapato did the best possible in a drought year of shortages.

Wapato critics say that other irrigation districts did a better job of acting on publicly available information to manage flows.

The Roza District, for example, discussed several options with irrigators at meetings that generated vigorous debate about how best to allocate the limited water. Roza's board of farmers then voted to shut off water flows from May 12 through May 31 so they would have more water available later in the season.

On the Wapato project, there was no similar effort to conserve water early in the season.

Bureau of Reclamation records indicate that Wapato, during the month of May, averaged 5 percent more water running through the canal system than in June, July and August, when water demand for most crops peaks.

Once summer began, and temperatures soared, parts of the canal system ran dry as some farmers grabbed water that they were not entitled to by opening gates that were not properly secured — or had their locks cut off.

The rash of thefts triggered criticism of Wapato's management for failing to investigate and crack down on offenders.

"That's just not right. When we need water, we're dry, and when we don't need water, they're drowning us in water," said Bob Halvorson, a Wapato farmer who said he lost half of an August mint crop due to a lack of water.