

North Forty News

North Forty News: July 29,, 2011

By Jeff Thomas

Rainfall boosts crop yield in Northern Colorado

As the combines began to roll through northeastern Colorado's wheat fields in mid-July, Mother Nature appeared to be cooperating in grand fashion.

Fields stunted by low moisture through the winter and early spring were buttressed by spring and summer rains, which boosted most crop yields to at least average.

With record-high wheat prices around the world, that may be enough to make it a good year for most farmers.

"I think we're going to see near-average yields, and given what we've been through in terms of long-term soil moisture that's very good," said Reagan Waskom, the director of the Colorado Water Institute at Colorado State University.

Waskom said estimates made as the harvest began called for about 75 million bushels, close to average for the state but short of last year's 100 million bushels. However, a large part of that deficit was coming from southeastern Colorado, where drought conditions are severe.

"The biggest problem we have right now is (the potential for) hail," Waskom said.

But even there the skies appeared to be cooperating.

A high-pressure area pushed into eastern Colorado in mid-July, producing a heat wave similar to that in most of the U.S. to the east, and pushing the monsoonal moisture to the west. So while fields were drying and combines were humming through eastern Colorado, high-country precipitation helped continue what has been the most abundant water year in memory.

At Lake Granby, the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District was spilling water back into the Colorado River for the first time in 11 years. And the continual precipitation has kept most river drainages holding six to 20 times their normal moisture content.

“The flow out of Granby is about 20 times what you’d normally see at this date,” Northern spokeswoman Dana Strongin said on July 19. “Even yesterday’s rain forced us to let out 200 cfs (cubic feet per second) more water.”

The amount of water flowing to Nebraska through the South Platte River Julesburg this year has Glade Reservoir advocates thinking about what might have been.

By July 19, 329,000 acre feet of water had already passed out of the state, approaching the long-term average (from 1950) of 417,000 acre feet for the water year ending on Nov. 1 and far surpassing the 168,000 acre-feet average for the last, largely drought-stricken, decade.

Northern officials estimated they could have met interstate compact requirements and still have been able to divert 303,000 acre feet of that water, more than enough to fill the proposed Glade reservoir, which would contain 177,000 acre feet.

In the west, water flowing in the Colorado River was expected to raise the level of Lake Mead by 20 feet, easing drought worries in southern California and Nevada. Already 5,546,000 acre feet had passed out of the state by July 18, easily surpassing the long-term average of 4,435,000 acre feet for a water year that doesn’t end until Nov. 1.

Despite the abundance of water in much of the state, drought conditions in southeast Colorado are dire and Bent, Chaffee, Custer, Fremont, Las Animas, Huerfano, Prowers, Kiowa, Pueblo, Baca, Crowley and Otero counties have been designated disaster areas by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

A weather station at Walsh, in Baca County, had received only 4 inches of precipitation by July 19, compared to an average 13.9 inches, said Becky Smith, a research associate with the Colorado Climate Center at CSU.

Waskom said the livestock producers in the southeast were “getting hammered,” having to cull herds where feed has gotten too expensive.

Smith said the monsoonal moisture that drenched northern Colorado was no help at all to the drought-stricken southeastern section of the state.

“Pretty much the dividing line was I-70,” she said.

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