

Central Oregon Producer Feedback on Drought Impacts and the Need for a State Disaster Relief Fund



This feedback was collected by the High Desert Food & Farm Alliance in reference to the unprecedented drought and irrigation shortages experienced by producers throughout Central Oregon in 2021. Each testimony is from the point of view of the producer as they were asked the impact of the drought on their operation and business, the financial losses due to the drought, and if they were able to access federal aid to relieve some of the burden caused by the drought.

Courtney Schuur, North 44 Farm (Bend, OR)

In our irrigation district (Arnold) we have had our water shut off for two years in a row and the impacts are worrisome. On the agriculture side of things we are seeing fields go fallow as the cool season perennial grasses that normally thrive in central Oregon become unproductive in the overly dry and hot climate. With two years of no irrigation, these fields are starting to die off and create bare patches of land. Because there's no moisture/irrigation to reseed these bare fields, we are seeing a loss of precious topsoil and organic matter. Not only is there a loss of topsoil, but there's a loss of feed for livestock which leaves landholders and business owners like ourselves with a tough decision: reduce your herd size and therefore your future business revenue while still having to pay the full cost of water and land taxes, buy in hay at record-high prices, or find more land for your animals to graze. As a small growing business, we were not in a position to lose future revenue so we knew we needed to find more land and with that came significant business changes that needed to happen quickly. We strongly believe in rotational grazing as a way of building soil and creating resilient on-farm ecosystems for grazing so we started to canvas our farm neighborhood with flyers stating that we rotationally graze sheep and we're looking for land. We slowly picked up about 25 leases and over 100 acres which has allowed us to stay in business this season. We had significant upfront investments associated with this change from on-farm to off-farm grazing which I'll outline in the next question. Culturally, it's hard. We worry that if water management stays the same over the next few years that the farms in our district will not be able to operate. We have even spoken about potentially moving to other irrigation districts with more senior water rights because the water is here, it's just so poorly managed by the districts based on antiquated water rights. Essentially, it's near impossible to plan for the future with this drought plus poor water management and as someone raising grass fed animals, you are always planning at least 2 years out.

The financial impact has been significant for us:

- loss of two hay cuttings due to water shortages - 62 ton @ \$290
- portable fencing for sheep on leases land and water trailers - \$4K
- 25 pasture leases - \$3k
- no till seed drill as we pivot our fields from perennial grasses to more drought tolerant annuals - \$30k
- full water allotment fees although not received - \$4K
- total impact - \$41,000

We have spoken to FSA about drought relief programs but there isn't much on offer yet because we haven't lost animals due to drought. We are however on their radar for the feed transport relief. We do not have crop insurance, traditionally perennial grazing fields are difficult to ensure or get relief from through FSA

Katia Steckly, Double F Ranch (Antelope, OR)

- Our 2021 hay yields were reduced to 37% (while still incurring 100% of the expenses). Being unable to supply our winter feed needs on-farm, we had to purchase retail hay
- Availability of retail hay was limited since supply was low. Many farmers took only 1-2 cuttings instead of 3-4 resulting in a hay shortage in the entire west. The retail price of hay was up 30-70% in August and will rise through the winter, especially if it is a hard winter.
- We incurred additional hay feed costs of \$15,377. We received some federal assistance through FSA's Livestock Forage Program for \$6,374.
- The yield for our on-farm produced small grains and legumes for chicken and hog feed was 29%. Again, not being able to raise it ourselves, we had to source the ingredients locally. As I mentioned in the call, the supplemental protein source that can be raised in our climate is peas. Yields of peas are down locally and any imported peas would come from Canada which experienced a 17% yield in pea crop this year. While we paid \$270 a ton for peas in February, we paid \$900 a ton in October and were informed we may not be able to get peas at any price in the coming months. This combination of drought and pandemic supply chain interruption will impact pretty much every corn/soy free livestock farmer in Central Oregon (including Home Farm, Great American Egg and other producers that source bulk corn/soy free feed from Helena) over the next year or more.
- This is not an issue in town where there are many farms and the impact is spread out, but out here where farms are miles in between and our crops are the "only thing green for miles" we

experienced severe wildlife pressure in the late summer from elk. The grass on the rangeland was short water and did not produce forage. We estimate that between 20-30% of our hay crops and small grains/legumes were consumed in a 2 week period by a herd of 150 elk.

- The lack of grass on the rangeland also meant less grazing forage for the 50 head cattle herd. Paddocks that would feed the herd for 30 days on a good year, fed them for 4-10 days. We rented CRP pasture from the neighbors to fill the forage gap on-farm. We also weaned our calf crop 6 weeks early because we didn't have the grass. The commodity cattle price is falling as the entire west starts reducing/liquidating herds. It will get lower as the winter drags on.
- We reduced the numbers of our brood herd by 20% because we didn't have pasture and wouldn't have hay through the winter. This reduction will set back our planned growth for several years.
- In Madras (North Unit Irrigation District), our small finishing pastures had their water cut off in August and with no water, the pastures did not grow or recover. We supplemented with some hay but as grass-finished beef producers we find the quality of our product to be highest when finished on green, growing grass. We reduced the numbers of beef harvested by 20% and harvested some beef as lower quality ground beef in the fall months due to lack of grass and inability to move up fall processing dates.
- Our broiler chickens were greatly affected by the "heat domes". We lost about 10% of our finishing broilers during the heat spells. Also the heat depressed the bird's appetite and thirst over an extended period and if they don't eat, they don't gain. Our average carcass weight dropped from 4.5# to 2.75# on the batches of birds that were within 3 weeks of harvest. For younger birds that experienced the heat wave in the brooder, the average carcass weight dropped from 4.5# to 3.75#. The estimated loss of retail value from heat-induced death or decreased carcass size from the two heat domes was \$6,375.
- We've been farming on the margins for over a hundred years here. We'll be fine but climate resiliency is a real threat to the future of local foods and the impacts will be most acutely felt by beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers that don't have the resources to pivot.

Cate Havstad Casad, Casad Family Farms (Madras, OR)

- We dried up over 70% of land we manage, while paying 100% of our overhead costs for water. In case you don't know this we pay for 100% of water even though we were only delivered 30%. Plus all the overhead costs of running the farm, taxes, etc. all remain the same and we could only produce on 30% of our land. It's an economic disaster.
- Approximately \$80,000 in losses

- I have the non insured crop loss forms sitting on our table waiting to be finished. Farms like ours / non commodity crops they don't really offer crop insurance for.
- North Unit Irrigation District has tried like hell to get the Governor to respond to their ask for aid. Please bring up North Unit Irrigation District with her. Here is a stat to know: North Unit is BY FAR the shining example of water efficiency in our basin. It's the largest ag producing region in our basin, and second largest irrigation district in the entire state, and we have seen no state or federal aid in this disaster of a year. For sale signs are prolific