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NORTHERN NEVADA FARMERS ADAPT TO SEVERE DROUGHT

By Sandra Chereb
Las Vegas Review-Journal Capital Bureau

CARSON CITY — Fisheries are drying up and fields lie fallow as the lingering drought takes its toll in Northern Nevada, where the lack of water needed to support rural livelihoods is causing tension between neighbors.

Farmers and ranchers are being creative to try to survive the economic fallout for lack of water. They are experimenting with different crops, more efficient irrigation methods. One farmer is raising ducks and pheasants and turning part of his Lyon County farm into a hunting preserve to offset income losses — and be able to keep farming.

"There are a lot of places in the state where this is the worst drought we've seen," said Jason King, state water engineer.

In times like this, his is one of the toughest jobs in the state: to enforce more than a century of state water law grounded on the premise that those with the oldest water rights have first dibs.

King has another perspective.

"I think about the farmers out there who are trying to make every drop stretch," he said.

Perhaps one of the hardest hit areas is Lovelock in Pershing County, where farmers haven't received irrigation services for two or three years.

"We're starting to see conflicts arise between (agriculture) users, between senior and junior water rights holders and between groundwater and surface," said Mike Baughman, executive director of the Humboldt River Basin Water Authority.

A river runs dry

The mighty Humboldt is a meandering ribbon of water that originates in the mountains of Elko County in northeastern Nevada and terminates in the Humboldt Sink about 225 miles west. It is the only major water system totally contained within the state.

There is water upstream. But the farther downstream you go the less there is until it becomes a trickle and goes dust-dry by the time it gets to Lovelock.

"It's amazing the difference between the upper and the lower Humboldt," King said. "Being the fourth year of drought, the Humboldt River is so thirsty that whatever water is getting down is being sucked up by the ground."

Across Northern Nevada, some water users who traditionally tapped river water are turning to underground pumping. Some fear that's pulling water from other permitted groundwater users and further depleting the aquifer.

"Now they're looking across the fence at each other," Baughman said. "We're seeing this because people are chasing water."

Should the drought drag into a fifth year, some warn it's only a matter of time before wells are sucking nothing but sand and air. That is already happening in some areas,

mainly affecting shallower domestic wells.

It's not uncommon for Nevada's rivers and groundwater basins to be overappropriated, meaning that rights allocated on paper exceed available supplies.

"Water rights do not equal wet water," Steve Bradhurst, executive director of the Central Nevada Regional Water Authority that encompasses eight counties, said in testimony submitted this month to the Nevada Drought Forum. The panel was convened by Gov. Brian Sandoval to assess the drought and recommend policies to better prepare the state for prolonged dry periods.

Bradhurst cautioned policymakers not to "whistle past the graveyard."

"Whistling past the graveyard is when you do something to keep your mind off your worst fear," he said. "Nevada's worst natural resource fear has to be the real possibility of a water supply crisis in the near term."

Water woes are being felt across Northern Nevada.

"Farmers have fallowed valuable farmland because there is not sufficient water to grow the crops they would normally grow," said Darrell Pursel, a fifth-generation farmer and president of the Lyon County Farm Bureau.

"In counties like mine, farmers have been allocated 3 percent of their normal surface water rights and must rely on supplemental pumping rights to grow crops," said Pursel, who began raising mallard ducks and pheasants this year for future income.

He said if the region experiences another dry winter, pumping rights could be curtailed further next year, forcing 75 percent or more of productive agriculture land in Mason and Smith valleys near Yerington to be left barren.

"Drastic cutbacks to our water use due to drought will be detrimental not only to our farmers but also the local communities on which agriculture has a positive economic effect," Pursel said.

Nevada farmers and ranchers sold \$764 million in agricultural products in 2012. The agricultural industry in Nevada ranks 43rd in the nation.

Spring rain saving grace for some

Douglas County rancher David Hussman has 560 acres in Gardnerville where he raises sheep and cattle. Most of it is irrigated pasture, although about 200 acres are crops.

He gets his water from the Carson River.

"I have to make my decisions on what I'm going to plant pretty much in March so I can get the seed ordered," Hussman said. "In March, I looked at the snowpack and said I can't plant all my fields."

He left 30 acres bare and didn't plant any alfalfa, which he said requires watering into September.

But thunderstorms and an unusual stretch of rain from May into early July helped coax the hay crop.

"As it turned out, at the end of the growing season, we had enough to get us through the winter," Hussman said.

Tribal ancestry, pine nuts and trout

Delaine Spilsbury with the Shoshone Tribe in Ely said the drought has hindered the tribe's ancestral gathering of pine nuts.

"Pine nuts failed three years in a row," she said, adding that last year's warm winter has led to an infestation of bark beetles, further damaging the pinyon trees that produce the cones from which the nuts are harvested in the fall.

"Our winter last year just wasn't," she said.

For the Walker River Paiutes, the lack of water is a harsh blow to their ancestry. The tribe's name in native Paiute is Agai Dicutta. Translated it means "trout eaters."

"We're the trout eaters," said Wesley James, an attorney and tribal member. "Big problem. There's no more trout."

Walker Lake outside Hawthorne is the terminus of the Walker River, which starts high in California's Sierra Nevada. Since 2008 the lake's level has dropped 21 feet — 14 feet in the past four years alone.

The Nevada Wildlife Department used to plant trout in the once popular fishery. But plunging levels and subsequent poor water quality have left it unsuitable and toxic to fish.

"We haven't had a trout caught in Walker Lake in years," wildlife agency spokesman Chris Healy said.

Use it or lose it

Leo Drozdoff, director of the Nevada Conservation and Natural Resources Department and chairman of the forum, said the panel will recommend short-, medium- and long-range strategies. But tweaking century-old water law won't be easy.

Although the fundamental basis of Nevada water law is sound, "there are elements ... that do need updating," he said.

One aspect brought up repeatedly is the "use it or lose it" principle. Under existing law, water rights holders are required to show they've put their water to beneficial use or risk losing that water to someone else.

"The 'use it or lose it' caveat embedded in Nevada water law does not provide flexibility for agricultural producers who want to conserve by pumping less in a drought crisis," said Abigail Johnson with Great Basin Water Network. "Change water law to incentivize water savers and exempt them from (the) requirements."

Joe Sicking, chairman of the State Conservation Commission, proposed a moratorium on the rule.

"It is a very significant issue throughout the Nevada agricultural community as members stand to lose significant amounts of their rights and value to their operation if they do the right thing," Sicking said.

But others fear tinkering with water law will lead to upheaval.

"Nevada has the best water law in the West," said Floyd Rathbun, a range consultant from Fallon. "This drought is inconvenient but it is not worth compromising Nevada water law for some short-term gain."

The forum challenge

Drozdoff said one goal of the forum is to try to bring more certainty to water issues. Water disputes more often than not end up in court, and the outcome in one case can have unforeseen consequences years later.

"You go to court and you get this pendulum thing going on with regard to interpretation," he said. "I just don't think that's good."

A three-day drought summit is planned in September. A report with recommendations for the governor is due Nov. 1.

The overall effort to tackle drought issues in Nevada is a first, and many at forum meetings urged the panel not to abandon the process should Mother Nature wallop the region this winter with heavy rain and snow.

Drozdoff agreed the timing is right and momentum is strong.

"It is unprecedented and it is exciting," he said.

But the mere suggestion of tweaking water law causes people angst — forum members included.

"It is a bit nerve-racking," Drozdoff said.

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