

Commentary: Drought in the Walla Walla Basin and the unseen challenges

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Irrigation sprinklers in a field southeast of Walla Walla in October 2020.

Greg Lehman, Walla Walla Union-Bulletin file

Spanning parts of four counties in Washington and Oregon, the Walla Walla Basin (Basin) encompasses most of Walla Walla County, large sections of Columbia and Umatilla Counties, and very small areas of Wallowa and Union Counties.

This region is no stranger to drought — in five of the last 10 years alone, Walla Walla County has been under a Washington State declared drought declaration or advisory.

In mid-April this year, the drought declared in July 2023 was finally removed for southeast Washington, including Walla Walla County — spanning almost two years.

Since 1895, the average temperature in the Walla Walla Basin has increased 1.3 degrees Fahrenheit (Walla Walla 2050 Strategic Plan, 2021 wallawallawater.org) and projections suggest that average temperature will continue to rise.

Historically, the Walla Walla Basin has been a snow dominant watershed; however, projections suggest, that in the next 60 years that the basin will switch from a snow dominant to a rain dominant watershed; meaning less snow pack and an earlier peak snowmelt.

It is also anticipated that rain events will become more intense and heavier with longer periods between precipitation events. Summer precipitation events are also expected to decline in the Walla Walla Basin.

In combination, these projected changes suggest more droughts for the Walla Walla Basin, potentially for back-to-back years similar to 2023 and 2024.

Potential future climate conditions are not the only drought-related concern. Though Walla Walla means lands of many waters, the basin's water has been overallocated for decades. Farmers haven't been able to secure a new water right in the basin for years and to purchase an existing water right is costly.

Irrigators are often curtailed on their water rights outside of declared drought years, meaning there is not enough irrigation water to supply all water rights and instream flows. In 2024, irrigators on the Touchet River called in daily to a phone recording to learn if they would be able to irrigate that day.

Agriculture users aren't the only ones to feel the pain of drought. While the basin has instream flow rules set by the Department of Ecology, to protect and preserve fish and other instream resources over the long-term, many times, especially from later spring to early fall, flows are well below these targeted flows in the basin. Local residents even have noticed that smaller tributaries have lower late summer flows, which can have a significantly negative impact on the fish that call the basin home.

The City of Walla Walla is currently working on a Watershed Resiliency Plan. This plan will help the city address potential risks in the municipal watershed, prepare for potential impacts of climate change, and identify opportunities to improve the resiliency of our Mill Creek — an important tributary in the basin and from which the City of Walla Walla receives roughly 90% of its drinking water. A healthy and resilient watershed benefits all: families, farms and fish.

No one escapes the impacts of a drought — It is felt by the residents, paying higher prices for local produce at the farmer's markets. It is felt by the farmers, impacting their crops and livelihoods.

It is felt by fish, having to navigate lower than healthy flows instream. Drought is felt by residents and visitors who enjoy recreating along our rivers and streams especially in the hot, dry summer months. We all feel the impacts of drought, but together we can help increase resiliency in the region to help mitigate the effects.

Though we as residents cannot control the weather, we can control our role in water usage locally. We can plant native plants that require less water and thrive in our region.

Walla Walla County Conservation District and WSU Walla Walla County Extension are local agencies that provide assistance regarding low water use gardening practices also called Xeriscaping or Heritage Gardens.

We can decrease the size of our lawns and water them overnight, spread mulch and install rain barrels. We can use less water in home by shortening showers, installing water smart appliances, running full loads of laundry and dishes and turning off the tap.

Even small steps towards water conservation can have major impacts when everyone does their part.

This column explores local conservation challenges and wins in Walla Walla County and the surrounding areas.