



**United States
Department of
Agriculture**

Risk
Management
Agency

March 31, 2004

Billings
Regional
Office

TO: Ross J. Davidson, Jr., Administrator

FROM: Doug Hagel, Regional Director /s/ David Nickless for

SUBJECT: Regional Irrigation Assessment for the Billings Region-2004 Crop Year

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The Billings Regional Office has completed our Regional Irrigation Assessment of surface irrigation supplies for Montana and Wyoming (as specified in the Loss Adjustment Manual, FCIC-25010).

While snow pack levels are marginally improved from last year, the ongoing drought has left many reservoirs in the region significantly below their normal average. While more encouraging 2004 stream flow prospects may aid in the replenishment of these reservoirs, it will likely take several years of increased streamflow for many of these reservoirs to get back to their historical average capacity. Consequently, many watershed basins will most likely see reduced streamflows this irrigation season, reduced available irrigation water for producers in these states, and in some cases water will be unavailable.

Based on the most recent Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) information, Montana has snow water equivalent (SWE) of about 93 percent of average, and Wyoming has a SWE of about 89 percent of average as of March 1. Similarly, NRCS projects that in Montana streamflows will range from 77-91 percent of average, and in Wyoming that streamflows will range from 32 to 118 percent of average. Note that snow pack levels are highly variable. Given this information, it is suspected that there could again be a lack of irrigation water in some counties in Montana and Wyoming that rely on surface water runoff for their irrigation sources. The Corp of Engineers reported the 2004 Missouri River Basin runoff is expected to be 80% of normal and the entire amount (20 million acre feet) would be needed to return the water level in reservoirs to normal. Low water levels preclude irrigators from being able to draw water into the pumps downstream from the Sakakawea dam and on the on the upstream end of Oahe Reservoir (South Central North Dakota). Currently, the water level in Oahe Reservoir is about one foot above the all time low level of 1580.7 feet above see level. An example of the low water level is that, fisherman can reportedly no longer launch boats from boat ramps in some parts of the Fort Peck, Sakakawea, and Oahe Reservoirs, as the water levels are way below the end of the boat docks.

Insured crops grown in Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming that may be affected by lack of irrigation water and inability to pump water include: alfalfa hay, barley, oats, wheat, canola, corn, dry peas, dry beans, potatoes and sugar beets.

Based on the current snowpack totals and streamflow forecasts, parts of Montana, South Dakota, and Wyoming are in an extended drought. The reservoirs on the Missouri River are near all time low levels. Therefore, it is reasonable to anticipate that reduced streamflows could result in

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reduced irrigation allotments and receding water levels will leave some irrigation systems “high and dry.” In some cases water may be unavailable. For more information on current conditions we recommend accessing the following websites:

<http://www.wcc.nrcs.usda.gov/cgibin/bor.pl>

<http://www.wcc.nrcs.usda.gov/wsf/westwide.html>

http://www.waterwebster.com/maps_frameset.htm

ftp://ftp.wcc.nrcs.usda.gov/support/water/forecast_maps/missouri_river/wy2004/mist0403.gif

<http://www.state.nd.us/gnf/boating/mo-riv-system-boatramps-status.html>

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