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B.C. drought: 'If you're using water you don't need right now, it's cutting into your food security'

With much of B.C. in the grip of drought, farmers are on the front lines.

Glenda Luymes

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Amid a B.C.-wide drought, two corn plants in an Abbotsford field struggle to survive. Farmers face crop loss, feed shortages and tough decisions this summer. PHOTO BY NICK PROCAYLO /00101727A

As creeks and wells run dry, some B.C. farmers are trucking water to feed livestock, while others are reducing the size of their herds and anticipating crop loss.

Four B.C. regions, including the northeast, Bulkley Lakes, and east and west Vancouver Island are at drought Level 5, with much of the rest of the province at Level 4, according to a B.C. River Forecast Centre report released this week. Drought Level 5 means it is “almost certain” an area will see adverse effects on communities and ecosystems.

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B.C. farmers are among the first to feel the impact.

“They’re calling me, almost choking in tears on the phone,” said Ian Paton, the B.C. United agriculture critic and a Delta MLA. “They’re saying, ‘I have to send half my herd to auction.’”

The Vanderhoof livestock auction is expecting 1,800 head of cattle next week, said Kevin Boon, general manager of the B.C. Cattlemen’s Association. In a normal year, the auction might see 200 to 300 head at a July auction.

The early sell-off could impact B.C.’s beef industry for years to come, as ranchers sell cows that would bear next year’s calves. Most will go to feedlots in Alberta, with possible oversupply driving down the price at auction, although not likely at the grocery store.

“I know a pet peeve some ranchers have is when their irrigation is shut down and they go into the city and see a line for a car wash,” said Boon. “If you’re using water you don’t need right now, it’s cutting into your food security.”

Rangeland that usually feeds thousands of B.C. cows and calves through summer and fall has been devastated by [wildfire](#) or stunted by lack of water. To prevent starvation, ranchers are beginning to move cattle from the mountain grasslands to valley pastures that they would typically bale into hay and store for winter.



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Finding affordable feed sources to replace the lost hay will be a challenge long after the rain returns, said Boon.

In Ladysmith, Yellow Point Farms owner Rebecca Dault is getting a weekly water delivery to fill the farm's cistern, which provides water for the farm's 100 animals, including sheep, goats, pigs and poultry. An irrigation pond that collects rainwater to be used for crops like blueberries and garlic is at its lowest level ever for mid-July.

"We haven't had a good rain since ... I can't even remember," she said. "The soil is so dry, it doesn't retain moisture anymore. It just runs off the top."

Island Water Hauling owner Jacynthe Kutney said her company has been "running non-stop" bringing Nanaimo and Duncan water to farms and homes where wells have run dry.

"We're slammed," she said. "The demand is two months early this year."

Dault said it's been a tough couple years for B.C. farmers between fires and floods and drought.

"It's really hard," she said. "If we want local food — and we want it to be affordable — I think farmers are going to need more help."

Paton said surplus funds that were directed by the government to the agriculture ministry should be used to support farmers, rather than fund private companies in agri-tech.

"I think the government puts too much onus on farmers and ranchers to look after water issues," he said. "The government should be more responsive to digging and maintaining the mountain dugouts that would store more (snowmelt and rainwater)."

In drought, the ability to produce food is linked to water access, said Sean Smukler, a professor of Land and Food Systems at the University of B.C. "Plants don't grow without water."

Smukler called the drought a "glimpse" of B.C.'s future as the climate changes.

“The challenge is that we need to start building the infrastructure for the climate of the next 30 to 100 years,” he said. “The public needs to understand the need to invest tax dollars in these projects so our kids can have local fruit and vegetables.”

In the Okanagan, where summers are usually dry, a system of reservoirs and dams, some of them 100 years old, collects water to irrigate the valleys, including the area around Kelowna, said Rod MacLean, the city’s manager of utility planning.

“An irrigation system is a risk-mitigation system for agriculture,” he said.

Kelowna is protected against a one-in-10-year drought, but improving and increasing capacity has been discussed. The problem is that “some of the easy stuff has already been done,” and future work will be more complicated.

In a statement, the City of Abbotsford said much of its irrigation water comes from pumps that direct water from the Sumas and Fraser Rivers. Parts of the Sumas Prairie are beginning to see low water levels, requiring staff to back flood water from the Fraser into the Sumas River, a process that is dependent on high tides in the Fraser.

“Low tide levels are predicted in the Fraser River in August which may impact the city’s ability to back flood and could potentially limit irrigation water supply especially in the western part of the prairie,” said the statement. The city will ask agriculture producers to conserve irrigation water in that situation.

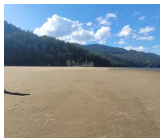
In a media briefing, Mark Raymond, the Ministry of Agriculture’s executive director of the agriculture resource division, said the impact on agriculture will be taken into consideration if the government moves to restrict or regulate water use in a region in response to the drought.

In a statement Friday, Agriculture Minister Pam Alexis said staff are “working hard to ensure the agriculture community is supported.”

B.C. has formally submitted a request to the federal government for AgriRecovery funding, which is a cost-sharing program to help farmers get back into production after an adverse event.

The government is also trying to find additional sources of feed, but a press release noted there are feed shortages throughout Western Canada. “If any additional feed is secured, it will be distributed to producers.”

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Disturbingly low water levels in B.C. lake and rivers may signal drought to come, say experts

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An Abbotsford farmer uses a tractor to move an irrigation line that will take water from a ditch to an irrigation cannon that sprays water on crops. PHOTO BY NICK PROCAYLO /00101727A



An unirrigated corn field in Abbotsford struggles in the midday sun. Lack of water causes stress that lead to shrivelled, stunted plants and prevents a cob from forming. The field is also more susceptible to disease and pests. PHOTO BY NICK PROCAYLO /00101727A



An irrigation system on a hay field in Abbotsford ensures a farmer will get several crops this summer. The water in the Sumas Prairie is pumped from the Sumas and Fraser Rivers through a system of irrigation canals and ditches. PHOTO BY NICK PROCAYLO /00101727A



A corn field in Abbotsford benefits from irrigation water. In the past, B.C. farmers could rely on summer rain to help crops grow, but agriculture experts say climate change could mean food production in B.C. is reliant on irrigation, which can be costly. PHOTO BY NICK PROCAYLO /00101727A



Farmers spends hours every day keeping crops watered using irrigation systems, but not all farms have access to irrigation water. PHOTO BY NICK PROCAYLO /00101727A