

Irrigated yields in the Big Horn basin area of northwest Wyoming

Farm policy does not recognize irrigation as a primary source of moisture to crops. Farm Bill policy has considered irrigation as a supplement to producing crops. Most of the land that is farmed here in Park County, Wyoming has been irrigated under the Buffalo Bill irrigation project since 1910 or before. This was the first Bureau of Reclamation project in the United States and came about because of Bill Cody's vision to grow crops here. Crops can only be grown by applying irrigation water as the valley area is really a desert type of climate where we receive only 5 -7" of precipitation a year. The Buffalo Bill irrigation project area covers approximately 90,000 acres of irrigated cropland that is served by a series of canals fed with water from Buffalo Bill reservoir. This reservoir and many other irrigation storage reservoirs in Wyoming are filled in the spring by snow run-off. Without this stored water and the system of canals for delivery of the water, there would not be any cropland in the county except for the very limited number of acres that are irrigated by water diverted from streams.

Under the yield statute, for a crop to have a full irrigated yield for direct payment purposes, the crop had to have been grown using irrigation and acres must have been reported to the ASCS Office during the crop years of 1981-1985. In the cropland areas of the Big Horn basin and other areas of the west, although a program crop or crops may not have been grown, non-program crops such as sugar beets, alfalfa and dry beans were grown using irrigation. Would it be possible to consider the irrigation history of the cropland on the farm rather than the program crop? By using Bureau of Reclamation and local irrigation district records, it would be very easy to prove that crops grown from 1981-1985, including non-program crops, were grown by applying irrigation water.

Perhaps Farm Bill policy needs to have the ability to flex according to the region of the country in which it is implemented. What works in Iowa, or Maine, or Florida and South Texas will probably not work in Wyoming or Washington State and vice versa. I am aware that other areas, much larger crop growing areas of the country use irrigation as a supplemental resource for growing crops. However, there are small pockets in almost 12 states in the west that rely completely upon irrigation to produce a crop.

The argument can be made that perhaps, due to production costs etc. these areas should not raise crops. But I can report that due to the lack of moisture this area in the Northwestern part of Wyoming is almost a laboratory conditions for raising seed crops. Crops producing high quality, consistent seed varieties for grasses and other crops are raised here because the inputs, including the water, can be controlled almost 100%.

Setting triggers and allowing State Committees to oversee the regional differences of farm policy would aid greatly in bringing effective Farm Bill policy to the many diverse areas of this country.

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