

Hope on the Horizon?

Contributed by Jaques Rutten

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Lu Pugrud is not sure whether it was the work of the man they call "the rainmaker." Perhaps it was the rain dance they held at the Winnett Bar a few weeks ago. Or just maybe, it was simply an act of God. But she does know it's been raining at her ranch near Winnett. Long, soaking, replenishing rains. And she's happy. All across Central Montana there was a feeling of relief this week as much needed precipitation doused the parched landscape. It's raining. And many feel Matt Ryan of Mt. Shasta, California, the so-called rainmaker, is the man responsible.

"I'm optimistic, I sure am," Ryan told the News-Argus Wednesday. "I know there are a lot of people out there breathing easier." "Yes, I'm optimistic that Montana is finally coming out of the drought."

Ryan has been working throughout Central and eastern Montana since mid-May. In addition to the Winnett area, he also stayed in Lewistown for five days and worked near Hobson. All but the Brady-area in the far north central part of the state are getting significant moisture.

"We're batting three for four," he said. "But you know how it is when that happens. You don't think about the doubles you hit that day. You're thinking about that curveball you missed on the third strike."

So at the moment, I'm a little concerned about what's happening in that north central area. If they were getting this rain right now, I'd be on my way home."

Storm Clouds Brewing

There may be dark clouds on the horizon now, but dry, droughty, sunny skies dominated Big Sky country in mid-May as the rainmaker began his work.

By month's end, Lewistown had collected a paltry .38 inches and the state continued to plunge deeper and deeper into one of the worst droughts of the last 100 years.

The failure to produce the needed moisture in May added fuel to skepticism about Ryan's abilities, even among those primarily responsible for bringing him to the Winnett area.

But then came June: cool, calm and wet.

As of Friday morning, Lewistown had received 3.58 inches of rain — a whopping 2 inches above normal for this time of month.

"We're getting some good, widespread rains," said Ryan. "I'm confident the systems have opened up and it looks good for the resumption of summer rains."

Even with the recent unexpected precipitation, skeptics remain. Most point to May as proof of Ryan's inability to "make rain."

Pugrud said the rainmaker never guaranteed quick results. But he did promise to try.

"He told us he'd try to get it started in May, but he couldn't guarantee anything," she said. "Now it's starting and whether he had anything to do with it, I don't know."

"But there are people in the state who think he's doing okay, and I sure wouldn't knock it."

Phyllis Furman of Glasgow has six comforting words of advice regarding the work of the rainmaker: Be patient. The rain will come.

"I know those people (in central Montana) are frustrated, she said. "But I would tell them to be patient. He's not a miracle worker and he needs some time. Down there he's working in almost desert conditions

because of the drought.

"We had one of the driest Aprils ever this year and it was scaring the heck out of us," continued Furman. "Our crops and pastures were going down in a hurry."

Giving up was not an option, though, and Furman knew exactly what she needed to do.

She and her husband Jim got on the phone and began dialing for dollars, just like she has done five times in the last 10 years. She raised the \$15,000, the rainmaker arrived, and the rains started shortly after.

"It's wet," said Furman. "Too wet, almost. We're trying to spray between showers and we can't even do that. As of June 9, we're sitting 117 percent above normal.

"Just like last year when I called him."

Many feel what happened in Glasgow last year was what put Ryan on the map. While fires and drought ravaged the rest of the state, the northeast section enjoyed above average moisture. The rainmaker was at work and the Furmans enjoyed one of their best crops in the last 50 years.

"We follow the weather like a religion up here," she said. "And last year, they were forecasting extreme drought for our area, just like they were for the rest of the state.

"I knew we couldn't afford that so I got on the phone and started calling our group of 20 people. I told them what the forecast was calling for and they said, 'Bring him in.'"

It didn't take long before the Furmans and the area had, "rain coming out of our ears, just like we do now."

"It sounds crazy, I know," continued Furman. "But it works. We have a lot of skeptics around here, heck, I'm a skeptic too. But I'm not stupid." Community Support

It was raining in Ryegate on June 8 as the rainmaker spoke to a crowd of a 100 drought-weary farmers and ranchers assembled at the Ryegate High School .

He told the News-Argus the support in Ryegate has been more widespread than anywhere he has worked. Ryan said they raised the \$10,000 through nearly 100 different sources.

"From farmers and ranchers to businesses and banks, they made it a real community effort," he said.

Ryan said the outlook is good, not just for Ryegate and Lewistown and the central area, but across most of the state.

"The first time up this way, it took us 37 days in February and March till we started getting some results," said Ryan.

"But then we came back up in mid-May and things had gone back dry and desiccated. Still, it only took us about two weeks to get a response this time, which is good. So when people say, 'Well, he didn't make rain in May,' I just tell them, 'I didn't expect to.'"

"But nobody predicted a wet June. The National Weather Service didn't see this coming."

Ryan said with God's help and the faith of those who supported his efforts all across the state, moisture impulses were pulled into Montana and should continue to come through the season.

June moisture won't end the drought, he warned, but it is putting moisture on the ground and in the air, and moisture brings more moisture, which he hopes will carry Montana back to more normal patterns of rain and snowfall.

"If you got enough moisture to end the drought this month, you'd be in a flood situation, and you wouldn't want that, either," he said. "But I think we can say the drought has been broke in the entire eastern part of the state. The Last Hope

Gary Gollehon of Brady does not doubt Ryan's sincerity or his abilities . . . but he is worried.

"This area has him perplexed," said Gollehon, who was one of the men responsible for bringing Ryan into the north central area that includes Great Falls and the region stretching to the Canadian border. "Other areas have been getting good moisture since he was there, but we're still pretty dry here. Not overly dry, mind you, but

not overly wet, either. The last time he was here in March, we got some real good rains for all of April, but the area dried out again in early May and the wind was a killer.”

Whereas other parts of the state such as Lewistown are getting dumped on, Gollehon said they received just .85 inches in June so far.

Ryan is the first to admit he is not overly pleased with the results in Gollehon’s area.

“There’s a big drought pocket up there and so far, it hasn’t moved,” said Ryan. “I’m going to wait and see how this current pulse of rains plays out, then see how things realign and give it one another shot up there.

“Those are good people up there, and they have really come out as a community and supported this in a number of ways.

“I really want to make sure they get something back — something more than they already have.”

Gollehon hasn’t lost faith in Ryan. “I believe he’s sincere in his work,” said Gollehon. “He’s been working from my place and up on the Marias river still trying to bring in some moisture.

“I’m staying optimistic,” continued Gollehon. “You have to be in the farming and ranching industry. Ryan is not going to leave us in a lurch.”

Like a lot of farmers and ranchers in Central Montana, Gollehon knows that what he’s doing sounds crazy to a lot of people. But he, like so many others, is desperate and sees Ryan as a last resort.

“I don’t want to sell out and move,” he said. “First of all, I don’t know where I’d go. I’m in it for my kids and grandkids and I don’t think my grandfather who homesteaded here put in all that hard work over the years just to have me walk away from it.

“Ryan can’t make miracles, but to me he’s our last hope.” Looking Ahead

Ryan hopes the recent widespread rains are a sign of a brighter future.

“It’s not the first drought I’ve broken, and it probably won’t be the last,” he said. “But I don’t want to keep coming back and doing this every few years in a crisis.

“My job is not just making rain, but helping the people realize they have a relationship with nature.

“I’d like people to understand they can do what I did without me.”