

**CHAPTER 1**  
**WASCO COUNTY OVERVIEW**

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## CHAPTER 1 WASCO COUNTY OVERVIEW

### A. History

Wasco County derives its name from the Wasco tribe of Indians. These early Indians were attracted by the abundance of the Columbia River fishing grounds. Indians existed continuously in this area from 10,000 B.C., until the 1800's.

In 1805, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark became the first white men to enter the region. Fur trappers, traders, and other expeditions also had occasion to pass through the area in the early 1800's. The first white people to settle permanently in Wasco County were the missionaries in 1838. A survey of lands in eastern Oregon was made by John Fremont of the Army Engineers in 1843. Little was known about rural Wasco County before this time.

Overland migrations on the Oregon Trail began in the 1840's. These large migrations greatly increased the populations of Oregon, which had been inhabited by only a few traders, trappers, and missionaries. At The Dalles, a natural barrier was created by the cliffs of the Columbia Gorge. From The Dalles, the travelers were forced to raft the treacherous Columbia River, or go inland across the Cascade Mountains. The Barlow Road was established as the route over the mountain range. During the late 1840's and 1850's, thousands of immigrants used this road.

The county of Wasco was organized by the territorial legislature in 1854. This 250,000 square mile county was the largest ever established in the United States. It included all the land between the Cascade and Rocky Mountains, south of the Columbia River and north of the California-Nevada borders. Wasco County was reduced in 1859 to the land in Oregon east of the Cascades. The county was eventually broken into the eighteen counties which now exist.

The discovery of gold in the 1860's in eastern Oregon and Idaho attracted prospectors. This influx of people created a market for cattle and sheep. The grasses of the county were conducive to cattle and sheep production. Gradually, the range operations gave way to wheat farming. Wheat production began when wheat seed accidentally got mixed with other seeds in a field near Dufur. Today, wheat is a major product of Wasco County.

The fruit industry began production in Mill Creek Valley; the first fruit being shipped in 1890. The lower valley bottoms south of The Dalles and Mosier became productive fruit districts. By 1897, about 6,000 acres of land were in orchard use. The success of the area as a fruit district-inspired numerous land development schemes at the 'turn of the century. Subdivisions were platted and sold to eastern purchasers as prime orchard lots. Numerous old plats on record at the County Courthouse evidence the enthusiasm generated for these projects. The most extensive development of the time was the town of Ortley. At one time, this town

contained over 300 residents and a developed commercial district.

The early 1900's saw the coming of the railroad. A major line up the Columbia and extensions into the forests of Western Wasco County and south along the Deschutes River allowed the forest industry to become an important part of the local economy. In addition, equipment and agricultural produce was also more easily transported.

The mid-1900's was an era of large government dam projects. Over 4,000 people were employed at the height of construction in the 1960's. This number was greatly reduced upon completion of The Dalles Dam. Approximately 150 people are employed at The Dalles and John Day Dams at present. Many of them reside in The Dalles and other parts of Wasco County.

#### B. General Location

Wasco County lies east of the Cascade Range along the Columbia River. It is bounded on the west by the forests of Mt. Hood National Forest, on the north by the Columbia River, and on the east by the Deschutes and John Day Rivers. A large portion of the southern half of the county lies within the Warm Springs Indian Reservation. The line between Township 8 and 9 South forms the southern boundary of the county.

#### C. Topography

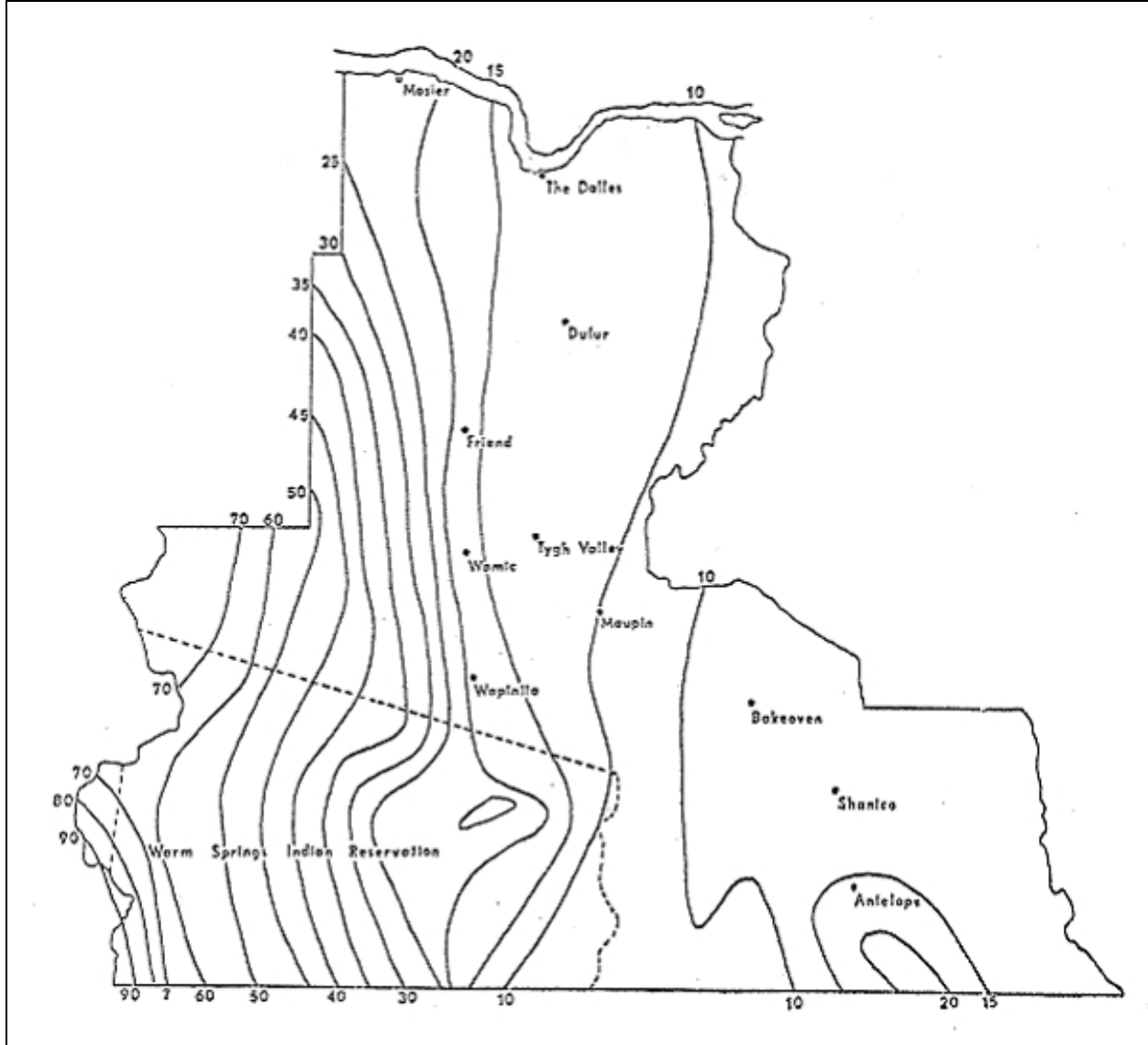
Steep rolling hills and sharp cliffs and canyons are characteristic landforms in Wasco County. Elevations vary from 5,700 feet at Flag Point in the western part of the county to 150 feet on the Columbia River. A general slope occurs to the north and east from the higher elevations of the Cascade range. Tributary streams dissect steep canyons as they make their way to the Columbia, Deschutes and John Day Rivers.

#### D. Climate

Wasco County lies in a transitional zone between western and eastern Oregon climates. Maritime air patterns are characteristic of western Oregon, while the drier continental air patterns dominate eastern Oregon. The Cascade Mountain Range forms a barrier which creates the climatic difference. The transition between these two major climates can be evidenced within the county.

The western portions of the county have higher amounts of precipitation with lower temperatures. Snowfalls as great as 14 to 20 feet can be found at the higher elevations near the Cascade Mountains. Rainfall amounts are also higher in the western portions of the county. The Cascade Mountains create this "rain shadow" effect, making the climate drier progressively to the east (See Figure 1). The growing season in the western elevations is only thirty days. Temperatures are cooler, with a 43 degree Fahrenheit annual average at Friend.

Figure 1 - Average Annual Precipitation in Inches



Warmer temperature averages can be found at lower elevations.

A drier, warmer climate is found in the eastern portions of the county. Precipitation amounts average less than fourteen inches per year. Average annual temperatures are greater than 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Precipitation decreases and temperatures increase at the lower elevations near the Columbia River and other river valleys. Table 1 shows the annual temperature and precipitation ranges and growing season for several areas in Wasco County.

The eastern and lower portions of the county have a longer growing season. The average number of days without killing frost in Antelope is approximately 130 days. The normal frost-free season is from early May to late September.

Highly unstable climatic conditions are found in the Columbia Gorge and nearby areas. The contact between continental and maritime air masses produces strong wind patterns. The Dalles receives wind over fifty percent of the time. Sustained westerly winds above 65 miles per hour have been recorded. Prevailing winds are north-westerly in summer and northeasterly in winter. Winds are less dominant away from the Columbia Gorge. Western Wasco County is generally protected from winds by mountains in the west. The rolling topography makes local differences in wind patterns. Wind patterns are shown

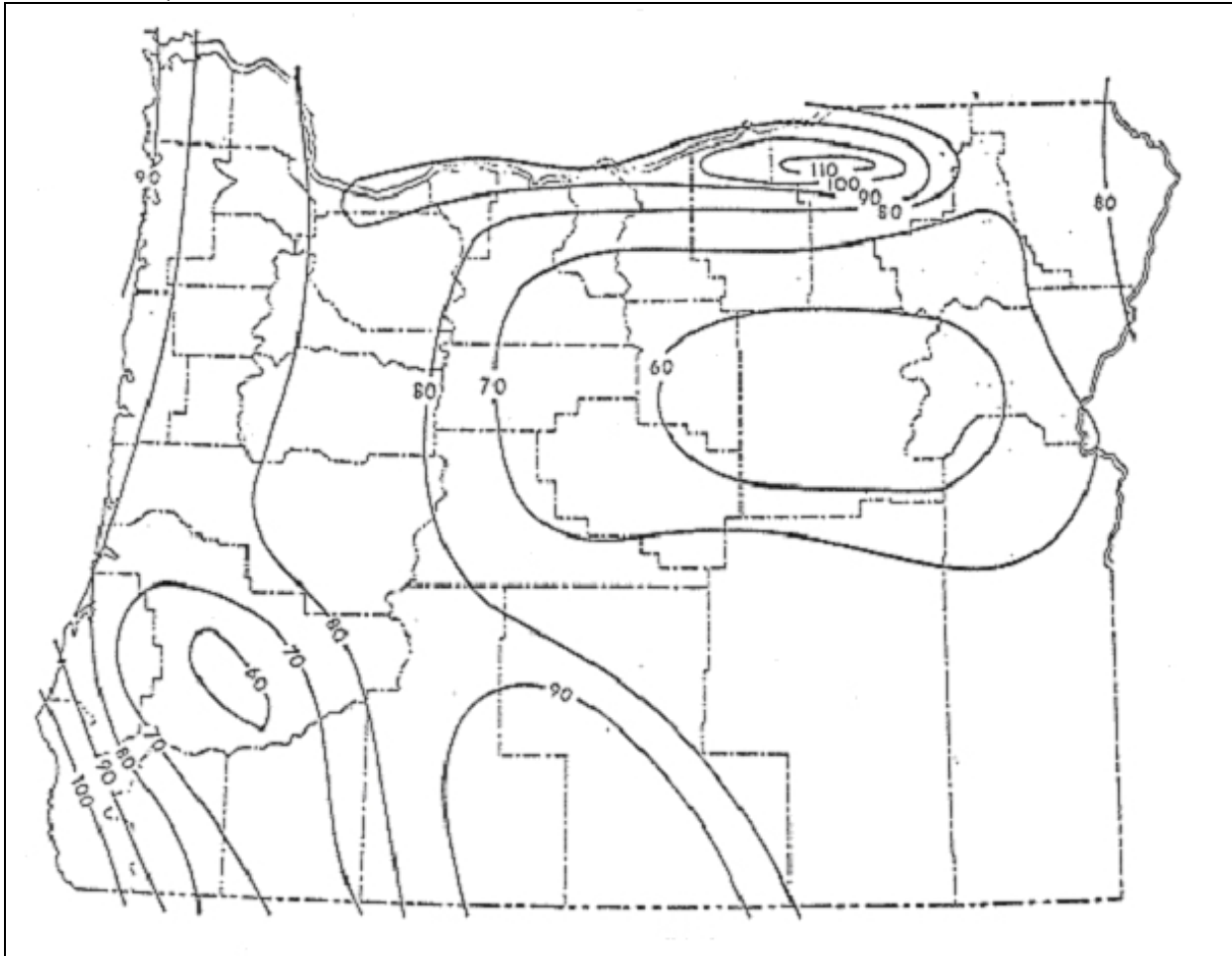
The topography of the county forms microclimates. The higher portions of rolling hills have higher soil temperatures because they are exposed to the sun and drying winds. The creek bottoms and canyons have lower soil temperatures and retain a greater amount of moisture. Differences in microclimates can be seen in the changes of vegetation. Trees and bushes are found in the canyons, while bunchgrass dominates the tops of rolling hills.

Overall, the climate in Wasco County is temperate and semi-arid. Low annual precipitation, low winter temperatures, and high summer temperatures are typical. Seasonal differences in temperature are greater than daily changes. However, daily differences are usually greater than those in western Oregon. Extremes of temperature most often occur when a continental air mass dominates the area with an east wind.

Table 1 – Annual Temperatures, Precipitations & Growing Seasons

| Annual Temperature                       |  |        |       |          |          |
|--|--|--------|-------|----------|----------|
|  | The Dalles   | Friend | Dufur | Big Eddy | Antelope |
| Avg. Max                                 | 64   | 58     | 63    | 64       | 63       |
| Avg. Min                                 | 43   | 33     | 37    | 43       | 35       |
| Mean                                     | 54   | 43     | 50    | 54       | 48       |
| Highest                                  | 115  | 109    | 110   | 115      | 109      |
| Lowest                                   | -30  | -28    | -28   | -26      | -27      |
| Annual Precipitation                     |  |        |       |          |          |
| Least                                    | 6  | 9      | 5     | 7        | 7        |
| Greatest                                 | 44   | 23     | 19    | 24       | 18       |
| Mean                                     | 14   | 17     | 12    | 14       | 13       |
| Growing Season                           |  |        |       |          |          |
| Location                                 | Average Number of Days without Killing Frost       |        |       |          |          |
| Wasco Co. overall                        | 100 to 217 (depending upon location and elevation) |        |       |          |          |
| Western Wasco Co.<br>(higher elevations) | 30   |        |       |          |          |
| The Dalles                               | 180  |        |       |          |          |
| Wamic                                    | 110  |        |       |          |          |
| Antelope                                 | 130  |        |       |          |          |

Figure 2 – Extreme Winds – 100 Year Mean Recurrence Interval (Wind Speed in Miles/Hour)



Source: "Distribution of Extreme Winds In the BPA Service Area" (Portland, U.S. Department of the Interior, Bonneville Power Administration). (Mimeographed)

#### E. Political Structure

Wasco County citizens are affected by a number of governmental levels. Federal, state, county and city laws and regulations all influence activities within the county.

County government is the main body that deals with rural county matters. It works directly with the people, as well as coordinating other governmental activities within the county.

The **Board of County Commissioners Court** is the main administrative body in Wasco County. It consists of the County **Chair Judge** and two County Commissioners. The **Court Board, along with the County Administrator administers** the budget and conducts the business of the county.

There are **seven several** elected positions in county government. The Clerk,

Assessor, District Attorney, Sheriff and Treasurer are under the administrative category. The judicial branch includes the District Court and Circuit Court.

The administrative county agency positions are appointed by the Board of County Commissioners Court. Among these agencies are the Health Department, Road Master, Surveyor, County Administrator, Planning Office, County Extension Agency, and Library. Judicial agency positions, such as the Juvenile Department, are appointed by the Circuit Court. These agencies operate within the constraints of federal and state laws. City laws affect agencies within the city limits.

Federal and state agencies often deal directly with County matters. They may intervene in subjects of state or national importance, or they may deliver services best available on a state or federal level. Such services include the post office, armed services, and any number of specialized agency programs.

Special districts can also be formed to deal with certain activities. These districts can involve the whole county, several counties, or portions of counties. In Wasco County, special districts have been formed for such things as education, economic development, recreation, and irrigation.

Each of the facilities and services available within the county will be discussed separately. It will be seen how the different levels of government affect citizens of Wasco County.