

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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RAINFALL OF THE WESTERN INTERIOR

In comparison with the well watered, heavily forested East the open plains were easily, in some areas, too easily, settled; but the fluctuations of rainfall in this marginal region make man's hold too precarious to favor a dense population. At about the 100th meridian the rainfall becomes too small for ordinary methods of farming, being less than 20 inches in the north and under 25 inches in the south. From here west to the Rockies, with increasing distance from eastern and southern bodies of water, the rainfall decreases almost to ten inches; so the Great Plains region is one of grazing, dry farming, or local irrigation. On the outlying highlands and the mountain front, the rainfall again rises to 15 or 20 inches.

The Interior Plateau and Basin region, walled off by high mountains, is arid. The rainfall of the northern Rockies exceeds 40 inches in Idaho, but is under 30 inches elsewhere; the central Rockies locally enjoy more than 30 inches, but the high plateaus of the south receive but 15 to 25 inches. The lower mountains and plateaus and the valleys in the rain-shadow of the Cascades and Sierras are arid, with less than 10 inches of rainfall. This aridity becomes extreme in the south; there, with lesser cyclonic activity, and greater heat, the rainfall averages under 5 inches a year. Water for the irrigation of these driest regions is not altogether lacking, for, except in the south, they occur in the lee of the wettest mountains. Thus, the Cascades with rainfall 10 to 15 times as great as that in the Yakima valley, supply abundant water for this great orchard.

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