

Irrigators, environmentalists seek ‘shared vision’

By Stephen Hamway
The Bulletin

BEND (AP) — Environmental organizations and irrigation districts hope a new agreement could help discussions about managing flows on the Deschutes River focus more on collaboration than litigation in the future.

The Deschutes Basin Board of Control, which oversees eight irrigation districts that manage water within the Deschutes Basin, and six conservation groups have each signed a memo titled “A Shared Vision for the Deschutes: Working Together so Families, Farms, and Fish can Thrive.”

The memo asks all signatories to work together as partners and commits them to a shared vision for the Deschutes River of the future, one with a healthier ecology and enough water to support sustainable agriculture and growing communities.

The agreement has no legal backing, and many of the ideas stem from the 1996 Upper Deschutes Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan. However, Gail Snyder, executive director for the Bend-based environmental group Coalition for the Deschutes and one of the leaders of the shared visioning process, said it represents an effort to get the various entities with a vested interest in water in the Deschutes River, many of whom have very different priorities and motivations, rowing in the same direction.

“There’s a lot of baggage, a lot of history,” Snyder said. “But all of us are here, to some extent, because irrigation occurred in Central Oregon.”

For the irrigation districts, following the memo means

finding ways to conserve water wherever possible, including piping canals to reduce evaporation, creating a framework to share water between districts and encouraging farmers to conserve water.

“We really all do have a shared vision, we’re just looking at it from different perspectives,” said Shon Rae, deputy managing director for the Central Oregon Irrigation District.

While a series of inter-agency studies and planning on the Deschutes basin have fostered more collaboration between environmental groups and irrigation districts in recent years, that hasn’t always been the case. A series of dams and irrigation needs on the Upper Deschutes have caused water to flow at radically different levels during different seasons.

The fluctuation contributes to ecological challenges on the river, including erosion, habitat loss and channel widening, according to Shaun Pigott, president of Deschutes Redbands, a chapter of Trout Unlimited. Snyder and Pigott agreed that there was once a tendency for environmental groups to see irrigation districts as an obstacle rather than an ally.

In perhaps the most infamous battle between irrigation districts and environmental groups, a series of lawsuits on behalf of the Oregon spotted frog led to a 2016 settlement mandating that water levels in parts of the Upper Deschutes can’t drop below certain thresholds.

Both Pigott and Snyder said their views on irrigation districts have evolved over time. As Snyder has worked more with the irrigation districts, she said, she has come to understand the role that

irrigation plays in the basin, and how best to work to return the river to a more natural state.

“We can’t lawsuit our way into the type of change we want to see,” Snyder said.

Rae added that the irrigation districts stand to benefit from a more collaborative approach as well. She said environmental groups can help educate farmers and irrigation districts on ways to conserve water and work within Oregon’s complex water laws. Furthermore, she added that the partnership will allow them to present a more united front when advocating in Salem for changes to how water in the basin can be allocated.

“We need the environmental groups, and they need us,” Rae said.

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Some of the work to conserve water is already underway. Mike Britton, general manager of North Unit Irrigation District, said the Madras-based irrigation district is working on an agreement with COID, where North Unit would assist on water-saving capital projects in exchange for receiving some of the water that’s saved. North Unit, which relies heavily on stored water, would then release additional water back into the Deschutes River.

“There are always contentious issues, and if we can continue to talk and meet, it’s better than running off into corners and pursuing litigation,” Britton said.

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