

Drought-stricken Oregon farmers embark on water bank pilot

By Michael Kohn
The Bulletin

BEND (AP) — Getting water to Central Oregon farmers who need it most takes time and investment, mainly in the form of new pipelines that are replacing leaky canals. But irrigation districts are also coming up with innovative ways to share water around the Deschutes Basin.

The newest idea is a water bank pilot program which will provide a cash payment to Central Oregon Irrigation District (COID) patrons who “volunteer not to use irrigation water for the 2022 irrigation season,” according to the Deschutes River Conservancy, which is facilitating the program. The unused water will be sent to North Unit Irrigation District, a junior water rights holder that has experienced limited water resources during the current drought. Once in the hands of North Unit, the water will be added to the district’s overall supply for the summer of 2022.

Kate Fitzpatrick, executive director of the conservancy, said the program will be evaluated after a year and possibly extended, depending on interest from irrigation district patrons. She said the program is temporary and the COID

patrons will retain their water right and can use the water in 2023.

“The point of the program is to help with drought relief for North Unit Irrigation District, as well as to restore flows in the Upper Deschutes River,” said Fitzpatrick.

The program is potentially lucrative for landowners who don’t want to use their water rights — it’s free money for patrons who may not want to water their property or have no crops or livestock to water.

The program is also an option to consider for COID patrons who simply want to help North Unit farmers who depend on water for their livelihood, said Fitzpatrick.

Each COID landowner can receive \$100 per acre that they don’t water, paid by North Unit. North Unit will also need to pay \$25 per acre to COID for administering the program, making the total cost to North Unit \$125 per acre.

The transfer of water can’t come soon enough for North Unit farmers, who have endured three straight years of drought and regularly fallow around half their properties due to the scarcity of water.

One North Unit farmer who is scaling back operations is dairy producer Jos Poland, who sells milk to regional dairy producers, including

Eberhard’s Dairy Products and Darigold. Poland says he is in the process of selling cows now because he can’t grow enough grass to feed them due to the water shortage. Buying hay has also become too expensive, he said.

“I am not sure if I am doing the right thing. Ask me in five years if I am doing the right thing,” said Poland. “Other ranchers are cutting their herds, too. They just cannot afford to buy feed to get them through the winter.”

Fitzpatrick said it’s not yet known how many acres will be transferred. That figure will be clearer by the start of the irrigation season, which begins Apr. 1. Mid-February is the target deadline for program enrollment.

Mike Britton, executive manager for North Unit, said water marketing and transfers have not been used much in the Deschutes Basin, but he is eager to see how the program will work.

“We’re hopeful for enough water to make a difference and validate the marketing and transfer process,” said Britton in an email.

The project will also help the Deschutes River ecosystem, as North Unit will be required to release 25 percent of the water it gets through the

project the following winter, helping to increase flows during the months when the river runs at its lowest level.

“That is really needed for the river, really needed for the fish, really needed for the Oregon spotted frog,” said Fitzpatrick. “And the irrigation districts have agreed to increase those flows under the Habitat Conservation Plan and they need tools to help them do that.”

The conservation plan requires irrigation districts to increase the flow of the Deschutes River over the next several years. By 2028 the districts will need to have raised the level of the Deschutes in winter to 300 cubic feet per second. The current level is around 105 cfs.

Fitzpatrick adds that there is no mechanism for individual North Unit farmers to pay for extra water. All the additional water will go into the canal to be used by the entire district.

“It’s meant to raise all boats, and that way farmers are not competing with one another for water but they are all gaining some benefit,” said Fitzpatrick.

North Unit farmer Cate Casad sees the project as a win-win for water patrons across the region, with some getting paid for water they

aren’t using and others getting the water they desperately need.

“For anyone who is not professionally farming or ranching, they should understand that they can be paid to lease their water, lighten their land management load, and also keep Central Oregon farmers and ranchers afloat through emergency drought conditions,” said Casad.

Because the project is new, Fitzpatrick said any level of participation in the program will be regarded as a success and base to continue the project. But goals have been set — the conservancy said it hopes water for 1,200 COID acres will be “sold” on a temporary basis to North Unit.

That would result in 5,200 acre-feet extra water made available, about 12 additional cfs, for North Unit this summer for irrigation and 1,300 extra acre-feet (4-5 cfs) restored instream in the Upper Deschutes the following winter.

Not all patrons will be eligible to participate in the pilot, said Fitzpatrick. Patrons that are in their fourth or fifth year of not using their water will need to work with their irrigation district to lease their water instream through the state in order to maintain their water rights.

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