

Law may carve up corporate crops

Stories by KATY SLADE
Of the Emerald

Grandma always complains about the tasteless vegetables and fruit we get nowadays.

David Nesmith, a staff member of National Land for People (NLP), agrees with Grandma. NLP intends to carve up huge corporate farms by forcing the government to uphold an old law, which restricts participation in irrigation projects to farms of 160 acres or less.

According to Nesmith, a return to family farms would mean better food, more ecologically produced; opportunities for

new farmers to enter the land; and through enforcement of the law an end to taxpayer subsidization of corporate farming.

Nesmith cited an example of a 106,000-acre corporate farm in California. Presently, the corporation that owns this farm can participate in federal irrigation projects, either by building the project with an interest-free loan (the interest is paid with tax money), or by taking advantage of cheap water rates from an already existing facility.

If the law were enforced, a farm of that size could not receive water from such projects and NLP believes, corporations would have no incentive to enter farming.

The NLP is made up of small farmers with

diverse political beliefs, ranging from Communists to members of the John Birch Society, says Nesmith, (who has long hair, a beard and probably doesn't belong to the John Birch Society).

He says the members have no trouble agreeing with each other on one matter — that corporate farming controls the market, small farmers can't compete and the federal government has no business subsidizing agribusiness.

The NLP contends that family farming would not raise food prices, but instead would bring back the old way, when farmers raised a variety of crops and each region was agriculturally self-sufficient.

Such a concept differs from the present

style of farming. In the present method each region produces the one crop on which it can make the highest profit.

Nesmith characterizes this practice as "mining the land."

"The nature of a family is more ecological than a corporate farm. The family is going to want to leave the land to their children and in better shape than they found it," he explained.

Nesmith also contends that family farming is more economical.

"The family farm has lower labor costs," he said. "It is in a better position to do things like watch for pests. And a family, unlike a corporation, does not have the incentive to turn over equipment every three years."

Allocation policies spearhead conference

PORTLAND — Four or five years ago, any mention of water scarcity in the Pacific Northwest might have raised a few eyebrows, but very few blood pressures.

Now, humbled and shaken by the drought, water policy is in the forefront of prospective political issues in the coming legislative session.

Because of this change in attitude toward water policy, the Oregon Student Public Interest Research Group (OSPIRG) held a two-day conference in Portland last weekend on "Water Crisis??? Alternative Policy Scenarios," in an effort to clarify present water policy and bring attention of the public to water allocation problems in Oregon.

Out of the conference came two basic concerns: the need for new policy decisions within the state and the need for an interstate water policy, because the Columbia River watershed contains water contributed by seven states.

Water policy in Oregon affects farmers, industry, urban areas, environmental concerns and water recreational concerns. At this time, the Department of Water Resources (DWR), which grants water use permits and the Water Policy Review Board (WPRB), which sets water policy for the state, provide the only system of allocation of water resources in Oregon.

Both the DWR and the WPRB underwent scrutiny and criticism at the conference.

Under the present system, the director of the DWR grants permits when the user can demonstrate beneficial use of the water and when sufficient use information is provided. The DWR may decide, however, to refer the application to the WPRB to decide whether the proposed use is in the public interest.

One of the duties of the WPRB, in its position of policy setter, is to establish minimum water flow requirements for watercourses that originate in Oregon. At this time, the board has set 300 minimum flow points in the state.

However, in a drought situation, the WPRB may find itself in the position of a water police board, cutting off farmers' (or others) rights to water to preserve the minimum flow of a stream. Unfortunately, the WPRB may have granted the permit in the first place.

Rollie Rousseau, special assistant to the director of the Department of the Fish and Wildlife, criticized the permit system and the WPRB. Rousseau said the WPRB has no mechanism to enforce minimum flow standards, since it operates on a complaint basis and there is no one likely to complain.

"The board is issuing rights to people even when it's clear they

won't receive water every year (as in a drought). What's going to happen when those people come in to complain to the board?" asked Rousseau.

"The system can't survive," he continued. "The political pressure is just too great. The board is creating an army of adversaries against itself."

Rousseau also expressed a desire to see more public input at WPRB hearings.

Chapin Clark, dean of University law school and chairer of the WPRB, in commenting on a statement in an OSPIRG handout characterizing Oregon water policy as "a patchwork of laws and rusty legal machinery", said he

could have written it himself.

But Clark defended the system, saying "We can't go through a drought and say we have no water policy."

"We would be better off tackling specific problems, rather than attacking the system broadside," Clark continued.

Clark mentioned the fact that 25 years have come and gone since a major policy statement has come out of the state and spoke of the need to bring existing policy up to date. However, he said, the ability of the board to keep up with present developments and to adequately set future policy was "shaky" because of the nature of the WPRB, com-

posed as it is of laymen with other demands on their time."

The problem of sharing water among states is no less complex. Oregon, as a downstream state on the Columbia, is in a potentially vulnerable position since the upstream states have the capability to divert water from the river for their own uses and lessen the amount of water available for Oregon, Clark said.

Janet McLennon, assistant to

the governor, said Idaho has been preparing a plan to divert an amount of water from the Columbia equivalent to a Trojan nuclear plant, in terms of energy lost.

The last time states attempted to create a water policy in common, negotiations bogged down before final agreement could be reached. However, efforts have been revived to renew negotiations with Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana.

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