

FLOOD

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Phil Hassinger reported about 750 acres of the 1,200 acres of farmland his family has on Catherine Creek is impacted by flooding. His sons, Jed and Seth, who run the family farm, are now operating four water pumps on the flooded land. Phil Hassinger said on Tuesday a pump much larger than the ones in place will be installed.

"It will pump thousands of gallons of water into the Grande Ronde River an hour," he said.

Hassinger said there is a chance his family may be able to salvage some of their flooded land for production this year. The crops grown

on it would include sunflowers and spring wheat.

Regardless of how things turn out, this is a trying time for Hassinger and his family.

"It has definitely been a bump in the road," he said.

Merrigan said the Grande Ronde Valley is prone to flooding because there are no dams on the river or Catherine Creek, which flows into the Grande Ronde.

"We have no flood control," he said. "We have nothing holding the water back."

He said having dams on Catherine Creek and the Grande Ronde would not only reduce flooding, but would also allow for both to have more even flows throughout

the year. The reason is that water held back in the spring would be released in the summer when flow levels are low.

Many farmers in the Grande Ronde Valley have built dirt levees to protect their fields, but unfortunately, floodwaters often jump these levees during the April flood. In some cases, this water cannot get back into the Grande Ronde River because it is blocked by the levees.

Merrigan said farmers may be tempted to cut their levees to let the water drain back into the Grande Ronde. Calling this "risky," he explained if floodwaters return these farmers will be hit harder the second time because they will have much less protection.

The Blue Mountain Seeds manager also said taking out levees and replacing them is not a good idea because new levees are weaker. According to Merrigan, it takes several years for the soil of new levees to harden so they are strong enough to hold back water.

Merrigan said this year's flooding has been caused in part by the late winter snowfall Northeast Oregon had. When April's heavy spring rain and warmer temperatures hit there was higher snowmelt runoff, swelling streams.

Hassinger said sometimes many fish end up in farmers' fields when the river floods and cannot get out because of levees. He recalled more than a decade ago his fam-

ily's land had so many fish trapped by levees that 58 pelicans appeared and fed on the fish on his farmland for about two weeks. The fish included bass, catfish and crappie.

The flooding conditions in the Grande Ronde Valley should improve over the next five days, according to Rob Brooks, a forecaster for the National Weather Service in Pendleton.

"It will be dry all week," Brooks said.

He added temperatures will cool today and Tuesday, which will reduce snowmelt. The forecaster also noted currently no portion of the Grande Ronde River in Union and Wallowa counties is close to flood stage. ■

OWEB

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For the third GRWM project, \$73,040 was granted to plan a restoration project to provide more rearing habitat for Chinook salmon and steelhead plus migration habitat for bull trout in the Lostine River. OWEB will partner with the Nez Perce Tribe, Bonneville Power

Administration and 10 landowners in the project area in addition to OWEB.

"Our organization was founded on the premise that the needs of fish and wildlife are intertwined with the needs of the community," said Jesse Steele, executive director of the Grande Ronde Model Watershed. "We do projects that benefit fish, wildlife, clean water and the local

community ... We're excited to keep doing this work, supported by both OWEB and the public."

The Wallowa Soil & Water Conservation District was granted \$134,987 to go toward improving forest health and reducing fire risk in the Divide area of the Wallowa Front. The organization will work with landowners, the U.S. Natural Resources Con-

servation Service, U.S. Forest Service, Oregon Department of Forestry and Wallowa Resources in addition to OWEB.

"We've seen wildfires ravage Eastern Oregon several summers in a row now. The threat is real, and we're grateful to have partners like OWEB and others stepping up to reduce fire risk in our local community on public and private

lands," said Lisa Mahon Warnock, project manager for the Wallowa SWCD. "We can't do this work alone, and we can't do it without public support."

The final two projects to receive funding both focus on the Wallowa River. The Nez Perce Tribe will receive \$235,097 to improve salmon spawning and rearing habitat on a section of the Wallowa River

by installing off-channel wetlands, alcoves and large woody debris. Wallowa Resources was granted \$250,726 to improve bull trout and kokanee spawning and rearing by enhancing a section of the Wallowa River. ■

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CAMP

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Lepper said her love of the outdoors began when she would "primitive camp" during Civil War reenactments. She and her husband at the time would take their two sons and spend weekends immersed in the culture of the late 19th century.

Lepper started acting on the Confederate side because of her residence in the south, but moved over to the Union Army when her husband traced his lineage back to the Northern side of the war. Performing as Yankees while living in the South gave the family limited options in the reenactments, but Lepper said they enjoyed following the storyline of being a displaced family

while Lepper's husband acted as a common foot soldier.

Once her sons grew up and found more interest in "motorcycles and girls" than Civil War reenactments, Lepper's love of primitive camping went by the wayside — until she decided on her retirement plan after a career spent in the manufacturing sector.

"I started watching YouTube videos about a year or two ago when I knew I wanted to retire. I was thinking, 'Do I want to stay in the Southeast where I'm comfortable, or do I want to try to expand my wings and try something different?'" she said. "I started watching videos of all the single women out there and I thought, 'If they can do it, I can do it.'"

So, Lepper packed up her pickup truck with a camper

shell, made a makeshift bed in the back and traveled more than 2,400 miles with her "little dog" on a cross-country trip from Murfreesboro to La Grande.

"We had a grand time," she said. "We didn't even try to go freeways, we went like state highways. It was just so enjoyable."

Stu Spence, Parks & Recreation director for the City of La Grande, said he's excited about having Lepper up at the lake because of her outgoing spirit. He noted the improvements the camp host position has made to Morgan Lake, which opened for the season April 22.

"Four years ago, we started the camp host program because Morgan Lake was getting used and abused," Spence said. "It has improved the caretaking over the park dramatically over the past few years."

The Parks & Rec director said before the department took measures to reduce negative behaviors, Morgan Lake was consistently vandalized and used after hours, especially between midnight and 2 a.m. The camp host position was created to quell these actions, as well as to provide someone to greet visitors and ensure the land was being treated properly.

Spence said the camp host's main duties are opening the park's front gate at 6 a.m. and closing it at 10 p.m., along with taking down the name, phone number, driver's license and address of each guest who stops by the park.

"Just by implementing those two measures, we've reduced vandalism and negative behaviors since the camp host has

been here," Spence said. "Especially the gate being closed seemed to cut down on the most problem behaviors."

Lepper said she is most excited about the camp host position because of the availability it offers to bring her grandsons up to the park, and to practice her primitive camping skills before she sets out on her nomadic journey across the Northwest.

"I know very little of the Northwest, so I'm going to take the boys up there and they're going to be my guides," she said. "I'm just looking forward to being with the grandkids, and it's the perfect way to spend a summer." ■

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