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The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality alleges the Port of Morrow has applied excessive amounts of nitrate-containing water to area farmland.

Oregon DEQ fines Port of Morrow \$1.3 million for nitrate violations

By **GEORGE PAVEN**
Capital Press

BOARDMAN — Oregon environmental regulators have fined the Port of Morrow \$1.3 million for repeatedly over-applying agricultural wastewater on nearby farms in an area that already has elevated levels of groundwater nitrates.

The state Department of Environmental Quality announced the fine on Tuesday, Jan. 11.

Under a DEQ water quality permit, the port collects nitrogen-rich wastewater from food processors, storage facilities and data centers at its industrial parks near Boardman, which it then reuses to irrigate neighboring farm fields growing potatoes, onions and other high-value crops.

But according to the agency, the port violated its permit more than 1,000 times from 2018 to 2021, exceeding the limit on how much nitrogen can be safely applied to farmland

and resulting in 165 tons of excess nitrogen in the fields.

Leah Feldon, DEQ deputy director, said these are “serious violations of water quality regulations that are in place to protect public health and the environment.”

The Port of Morrow is Oregon’s second-largest port, behind only the Port of Portland. It is in the Umatilla Basin of northeast Oregon, where in 1990 the state declared a Groundwater Management Area due to high levels of groundwater nitrates exceeding 7 milligrams per liter.

High levels of nitrates in drinking water is linked with serious health concerns, particularly for babies and pregnant women. Groundwater is used as a primary source of drinking water across the basin, which spans northern Umatilla and Morrow counties — including the cities of Hermiston, Boardman, Irrigon, Stanfield and Echo.

Historically, the sources of groundwater contamination in the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area are fertilizer used on irrigated farmland, confined animal feeding operations, livestock pastures, food processing wastewater and septic systems, according to DEQ’s press release.

“The existing nitrate contamination in the basin’s groundwater means everyone in the region has to do their part to reduce this contamination,” Feldon said. The Port of Morrow has not been doing its part, and DEQ looks forward to working together to correct these violations and protect our aquifers from future contamination.”

DEQ also alleges the port failed to monitor nitrogen at application sites on 121 separate occasions each year from 2018-2020.

Ryan Neal, the port’s general manager, could not immediately be reached for comment. It remains unclear whether the port will appeal the fine.

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