

Doubts linger over \$750,000 water grant proposal

Program would make funding available for 'place-based' planning

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon lawmakers are considering spending \$750,000 to help local communities plan for water projects but the proposal doesn't have the unwavering support of irrigator groups.

Senate Bill 266 would authorize the Oregon Water Resources Department to issue grants for "place-based integrated water resource strategies," while a broader funding proposal would allocate \$750,000 during the

2015-2017 biennium to the program.

The goal is for diverse stakeholders within a geographic area, such as a river basin, to plan for suitable water storage, recycling and conservation projects, Tom Byler, OWRD's director, said during a March 9 hearing before the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources.

By collaborating on such projects from the outset, farmers, ranchers, local governments and conservationists could avoid conflicts that might arise otherwise, Byler said.

"This is a voluntary process. We're not requiring anybody to use this," he said.

The "place-based" grant proposal would be funded as part of a \$50 million water package sought by OWRD in its budget request, Byler said.

Such grants would provide communities with financial and technical assistance to begin planning for improved water supplies, after which they could apply for further grants to determine feasibility and ultimately build projects, said April Snell, executive director of the Oregon Water Resources Congress, which represents irrigation districts.

"It's a way to get people to the table, get them to talk about their water needs and begin to establish trust," said Snell, noting that OWRC supports the bill.

Water for Life, which represents water rights holders, sees major shortcomings with the proposal, said Richard Kosesan, lobbyist for the group.

The bill does not clearly define

what "place-based planning" means or exactly how the funds would be spent, he said.

"We don't have any specific target. It's nebulous at best," Kosesan said.

Legislators should set some better parameters for the grants and consider the planning efforts that have already been taking place in water basins for years, he said.

Kosesan later told Capital Press that he's concerned the concept for "place-based" planning originated with land use planning.

While the concept is touted as being driven by local needs, the reality of Oregon's land use system does not conform to that vision, he said. "As it's evolved, it's gone completely the reverse."

The Oregon Farm Bureau had

concerns about the original language of SB 266 but is pleased with proposed amendments, which clarify that the grant program must work within existing water laws, said Katie Fast, the group's vice president of public policy.

The amendments also set a sunset date of 2025, which will allow its performance to be evaluated, said Fast.

The program might be useful with a water reuse project, where a city collaborates with farmers to use treated water for irrigation, she said.

If such a project is pushed by local stakeholders, they will ensure OWRD remains true to their original idea, Fast said. "I believe they will hold the department to task through that process."

Oregon GMO authority debated

Bills give state more say over biotech crops

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Critics claim proposed restrictions on growing biotech crops in Oregon would undermine voluntary coexistence efforts and spark new conflicts between farmers.

Legislation that would give state regulators more authority over the production of genetically modified organisms is touted by supporters as protecting organic and non-GMO growers.

House Bills 2674 and 2675 would both provide the Oregon Department of Agriculture the power to decide where GMOs can be planted and whether to restrict their cultivation to prevent cross-pollination with other crops.

"I want all farmers to succeed and the only way to do that is to coordinate how we're doing it," said Rep. Peter Buckley, D-Ashland, who

introduced the bills.

Under HB 2674, ODA would be required to establish "control areas" for biotech crops that allow the agency to set conditions for their production. Any GMOs growing outside such control areas would be considered "an infestation subject to eradication." Farmers who produce biotech crops would pay an assessment to ODA, with the funds compensating growers who suffer from "contamination" from GMOs.

HB 2675 would authorize ODA to designate production areas for biotech crops, with any GMOs growing outside those zones subject to "control area" conditions. The agency could also create reserves where no biotech crops can be cultivated. Buyers of GMO plants or seed would have their royalty agreements with biotech developers reported to ODA.

The ODA can currently set up control areas to protect crops from pests and diseases and to prevent cross-pollination between canola and related seed crops, said Ivan



Barry Bushue

Maluski, policy director for Friends of Family Farmers, a group that supports stronger GMO regulation.

"The law is already on the books. It's a question of what that authority looks like," he said during a March 5 hearing of the House Committee on Rural Communities, Land use and Water. "There's precedent here. ODA already does this."

In 2013, Oregon lawmakers pre-empted local governments from restricting GMOs because such power belongs exclusively to the state, but ODA doesn't actually regulate them, he said.

However, critics of the proposed legislation say the current system works fine.

By requiring ODA to limit biotech crops, the bills favor other types of farming, said Barry Bushue, president of the Oregon Farm Bureau.

"We don't want anyone pitted against each other," he said.



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Dustin Allen plants hard red spring wheat on March 9 in American Falls, Idaho. Allen is among the many Idaho farmers who planted earlier than usual this season, seeking to capture favorable soil moisture.

Idaho farmers off to early planting season

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

AMERICAN FALLS, Idaho — Many Idaho farmers are preparing fields and planting early due to a mild winter and the early arrival of spring weather.

Some crop experts, however, worry growers may be gambling by planting grain, forage and even some sugar beets so soon.

American Falls farmer Dustin Allen started planting hard red spring wheat on March 7, about two weeks earlier than usual. Allen said soil moisture is now ideal for planting, but he's concerned it's drying quickly due to recent dry weather. He planted a late-maturing wheat variety, hoping his crop won't advance too quickly and become more susceptible to a late-spring frost. With his spring wheat, Allen said he's "on the borderline of being concerned." Winter wheat, which is farther ahead in development than spring wheat, poses a greater risk of frost damage.

Eden farmer Jeff Henry also planted spring grain early.

"The reason we did it is because we're losing moisture, and there's no sign of rain in the forecast," Henry said.

Magic Valley crop consultant Jared Cook worries grain growers may be risking more by planting roughly three weeks before most irrigation water is available than they gain from germination in better soil moisture. Cook believes water-stressed wheat may be at a heightened risk of disease.

Picabo farmer Pat Purdy planted alfalfa and forage crops, which aren't insurable, earlier than normal this season, acknowledging he's assumed a greater risk of a killing frost. He'll plant his

grain after April 1, the earliest planting date eligible under his insurance policy for covering replanting. For Purdy, who draws irrigation water from the Wood River, planting early could compensate for the likely premature end to irrigation this season due to water shortage.

University of Idaho Extension cereals pathologist Juliet Marshall is concerned that early planting this season may stress crops that are likely to be weak already because of sprout-damaged seed. Marshall said following wet weather last August that caused widespread sprout damage in Idaho grain, testing of Idaho certified seed shows only 85 percent germination of much of the seed supply. Marshall said it's likely that stripe rust spores survived Idaho's mild winter, noting prediction models anticipate severe stripe rust outbreaks in grain this year. She's also concerned early planted grain may encounter more pythium, a crop disease that thrives in cool, moist soil. Marshall said seed treatments are advisable for early plantings.

"I've heard reports of people who have already planted their spring grain," she said. "Some people were starting in February."

Though some larger growers in Twin Falls and Burley have already planted beets, risking frost damage for the chance at bumper yields, Allen will plant his after April 1, deterred by the expense of replanting beet seed engineered to resist glyphosate herbicide.

American Falls farmer Jim Tiede will wait to plant to be safe. But even Tiede will take advantage of the mild start to March, enabling him to jump on preparing his ground and potentially avoiding the need to plant multiple crops at once.

Tough season points to need for stronger apple promotions, expert says

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — The record volume and falling prices of Washington's 2014-2015 apple season point to a need for strong, collective domestic promotions like those the industry once enjoyed, says a long-time industry observer.

"Whether you're selling apples or Kit Kat chocolate bars, you have to promote the product. That's the reality of today's market place," says Desmond O'Rourke, an agricultural economist and retired Washington State University professor in Pullman.

Prior to 2003, the Washington Apple Commission assessed growers 40 cents per box of apples and heavily promoted apples domestically and overseas. The commission lost a court case in 2003 and its ability to conduct domestic promotions. It cut its assessment to 3.5 cents per box and turned exclusively to export promotions.

Meanwhile, the state's large apple companies were happy because they could spend their promotional dollars as they saw fit.

But this is the kind of season, O'Rourke said, that strong, collective domestic promotions would be helpful. Wholesale prices have plummeted but retail prices have not, he said. A



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Zirkle Fruit Co. workers load apple trees on a trailer for planting at CFO Orchard near Rock Island, Wash., on Feb. 26. Companies still are updating apple orchards despite the huge 2014 crop and falling prices.

strong, collective program could underwrite retailer advertising in exchange for lower retail prices that would move more volume, he said. Individual apple companies do that to some degree but don't have the resources for a national campaign and don't want to help move Red Delicious if their company isn't heavy in Reds, O'Rourke said.

"If you had 20 cents a box on a 150-million-box crop, you'd have \$30 million to promote the product," he said.

The 2014 crop shrank another 1.6 million boxes by the March 1 industry storage report, said Bruce Grim, manager of the Washington Apple Growers Marketing Association in Wenatchee. About 1 million of the shrinkage was in Reds of siz-

es and grades shippers deemed unprofitable to pack and that have been dumped, Grim said.

The total crop now stands at 145.9 million boxes, down from a peak estimate of 155 million on Nov. 1, and with 76.5 million boxes sold and 69 million left to go, Grim said.

Washington had 53.1 million boxes of apples left to sell at this time last year according to the U.S. Apple Association, O'Rourke said.

Almost half of what's left is Red Delicious (29 million boxes) and the price of Reds is below break-even and still falling.

Mid-size Washington extra fancy Red Delicious sold at \$12 to \$14 per box on March 9, down from \$13 to \$15 a month earlier and \$18 a year

ago, according to USDA Market News.

Golden Delicious was \$13 to \$15 per box on March 9 compared with \$22 to \$24 a year ago. Fuji was \$18 to \$20 versus \$30; Granny \$17 to \$20 versus \$24 to \$26; and Gala \$16 to \$18 versus \$28 to \$30.

Prices are lower than desired but stable in all varieties except Reds and Goldens, Grim said.

"We're making good progress in moving everything except Reds and Goldens," he said. Potential carryover of Reds and Goldens affecting pricing of the 2015 crop is a definite concern, he said.

Slowdown of exports through ports cost 200,000 to 300,000 boxes per week for 12 to 15 weeks, a total of about \$70 million, which is business the industry lost and can't recover, Grim said.

Shipments have been running above 3 million per week since Jan. 10 and hit 3,519,244 for the week ending Feb. 28, according to the USDA. That may be a record.

Growers are just now getting first estimates on returns on the season and won't be happy, said Doug England, manager of Manson Fruit Cooperative. Returns are "dramatically" down from a year ago, he said.

Bill would allow Boise irrigators to fund cloud seeding efforts

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — A bill sailing through the Idaho Legislature would allow water districts to use member fees to fund cloud seeding programs designed to increase water supplies.

State officials have determined that assessments collected from water district members cannot be used to fund such efforts, said Idaho Water Users Association Executive Director Norm Semanko. Senate Bill 1100 would

give water districts "specific authority to be able to spend a portion of their budget on cloud seeding, if that's what the water users vote to do," said Semanko, who introduced the legislation.

The bill passed the Senate 33-0 and was sent to the House floor March 10 with a "do-pass" recommendation.

The bill would pave the way for Water District 63 in the Boise River basin to partner with Idaho Power on a cloud seeding program that could add 200,000 acre-feet of

runoff per year.

Cloud seeding efforts in the upper Snake River and Payette River basins have been funded with money from the districts' rental pools, which rent out surplus water stored in reservoirs.

The Boise district's rental pool, however, is small compared with the Snake and Payette basins, and district 63 doesn't rent enough water to fund cloud seeding efforts, said WD 63 Watermaster Rex Barrie. The district has been trying

to form a cloud seeding partnership with Idaho Power but the district's ability to fund the effort with user fees has recently been called into question by state officials.

"Cloud seeding is one example of one of the things we'd like to be able to do in WD 63," Barrie said. "But we need to have the statutory authority to do that and right now it's not clear that we do."

WD 63 provides water for 340,000 acres of irrigated land in five counties.

Jon Bowling, Idaho Power's engineering leader, said the company started cloud seeding efforts last year in the Boise basin and the company estimates that when the program reaches full throttle in five years, with the help of WD 63, it will result in an additional 200,000 acre-feet of runoff a year on average.

That estimate is based partly on what the company's cloud seeding efforts in the Payette basin are already accomplishing, said Idaho Power Meteorologist Derek Blestrud.

He said the additional water in the Boise basin would be "good for ... irrigators, good for recreation uses, good for wildlife and good for the power company."

The legislation would only permit a water district to use member fees to fund cloud seeding efforts if water users in the district vote to allow their money to be spent for that purpose, Semanko said.

"It's totally up to water users in the district," he said. "This bill allows them to have that discussion."