

Bill to help in Wood River Valley call

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BELLEVUE, Idaho — A bill in the Idaho Legislature would put Blaine County groundwater irrigators in a better financial position to respond to a recent water delivery call.

Groundwater districts are allowed to borrow up to \$1 per irrigated acre from lenders against their future assessments to organize, finance mitigation plans or tend to other district business.

The pending bill, S1169, which passed out of the Senate Resource and Environ-

ment Committee March 23 and was headed for a vote by the full Senate, would increase the borrowing limit to \$3 per irrigated acre.

The noncontroversial statute change would help about 190 Blaine County groundwater irrigators, representing 25,000 farm acres, cover initial costs of the water call, as well as the expense of hosting a county election to form a groundwater district.

Attorney Al Barker, who represents some of the well users, said Blaine County has estimated the election cost at \$10,000 and required a bond for twice the amount.

The water call was filed in late February by 63 surface irrigators, drawing from the lower Little Wood River system and the Big Wood River system below Magic Reservoir. The senior irrigators claim surface flows have diminished, as well use has reduced spring levels.

"Looking at what it was going to take to respond to the call, they felt the dollar per acre limit was going to put a crimp on what they were going to be able to do," Barker said.

Barker said the bulk of the funding will be needed to hire a hydrology expert before the

end of this year.

The Idaho Department of Water Resources has sent roughly 500 potentially affected groundwater users notice of a May 4 status conference in Shoshone.

The agricultural groundwater irrigators, who farm in the south county, plan a May election to form a groundwater district. The rest of the affected irrigators, mostly residential users and municipalities, will organize a separate groundwater district and are planning a November election.

A groundwater model for the Big Wood River Valley

aquifer is in development and should assist in analysis for the call. IDWR expects to complete the model by the end of this year.

Kevin Lakey, watermaster for Water District 37, which includes both surface and groundwater users, said a challenge to calibrating the model is the lack of historic records on the aquifer, where many wells were fitted with their first water gages in 2013 and 2014.

IDWR hydrology section manager Sean Vincent said his department's three groundwater modelers are collaborating with two modelers from the

U.S. Geological Survey on the project, estimated to cost about \$400,000 to complete. They've formed a technical advisory committee, with representatives from the various stakeholders, to offer input on model development.

In addition to the call, Vincent said the model will be utilized for longterm planning by the Idaho Water Resource Board.

"We have an initial model, and we're in the calibration process," Vincent said. "The one thing about the Wood River Valley is it's a smaller area, but we don't have a lot of data."

Action on wolves can't wait until 2017, senator says

WDFW official says agency trying to improve

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — A Senate hearing Thursday on a bill that might change Washington wolf policy in two years turned to a more immediate issue — the upcoming grazing season.

Sen. Brian Dassel pressed the state's wolf policy coordinator, Dave Ware, on whether the Department of Fish and Wildlife was content to wait until 2017 to do more to protect livestock from wolves.

"Are we good to wait two years to do anything?" asked Dassel, a Republican who represents northeast Washington.

"No, not at all," Ware said. The House and Senate have both voted to reconsider the state's wolf recovery plan, but the Fish and Wildlife Commission would have until June 30, 2017, to make changes.

At a hearing of the Natural Resources and Parks Committee, Dassel said he's concerned that wolves will inflict heavy financial losses on ranchers in his corner of the state unless the state does more on the "lethal deterrence side."

Dassel called reopening



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Okanogan County, Wash., rancher Scott Vejraska suspects wolves are finding his grazing cattle. He testified March 19 in front of a state Senate committee in Olympia.

the wolf plan a "great bill," but also said he was worried the legislation would disarm attempts to manage wolves more effectively now.

"My concern is we get this and then everybody goes, 'OK, we're done with wolves. We have a wolf bill. It's workable. Everything's great.' I don't think on the ground that's going to be the case," Dassel said.

Ware said WDFW has been working with producers on "localized deterrence plans" to more effectively protect livestock.

"We're trying to get these deterrence plans up and running before the grazing season starts," he said.

In an interview, Ware said WDFW has tried to learn

from past predations. The agency has talked with ranchers over the winter informally about how to prevent wolves from ever getting the taste for their livestock.

The number of wolves and their range are growing, however, he said. "Can we expect additional depredations? Absolutely," he said.

Okanogan County rancher Scott Vejraska, who testified in support of reopening the wolf plan, said he sent out 700 cows to graze and eight didn't come back, an unusually high number. He suspects wolves.

He said it's unrealistic to think his cows can be guarded as they spend months grazing on 300,000 acres. "You turn the cows out and hope for the best," he said.

Study examines what happens when wolves, cougars collide

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

Three of Oregon's growing wolf packs, perhaps 20 wolves in all, now use parts of the Mount Emily Wildlife Management Unit between Pendleton and La Grande. The same area is home and hunting range for an estimated 100 cougars.

A study underway by an Oregon State University graduate student takes a look at what happens when two of the West's iconic predators compete for food and habitat.

"Certainly from a science perspective, it's a really cool study," said Katie Dugger, an associate professor at OSU who is overseeing the research. Graduate student Elizabeth Orning is conducting the study as her Ph.D. dissertation.

As part of the work, researchers have placed GPS or radio collars on eight cougars and on at least one wolf each from the Mount Emily, Meacham and Umatilla River packs that frequent the area.

On her research website, Orning said increasing popula-



AP photo by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

This May 25, 2014, photo shows OR-26, a 100-pound adult male, after he was fitted with a GPS tracking collar outside La Grande, Ore.

Online

<https://sites.google.com/site/mtemilywolfcougarstudy/>

tions of large North American carnivores provide an opportunity to study two that share habitat, home ranges and prey.

The steady growth of Oregon's gray wolf population, which has increased from 14 to 77 confirmed wolves since the end of 2009, made interaction with cougars inevitable.

"We could kind of see this

was going to happen," said Dugger, of OSU.

Although larger than wolves, cougars are likely to fare worse in the competition because they are solitary animals. Wolves travel in packs and can kill adult cougars, compete for deer and elk, chase cougars off carcasses they've been feeding on and force them into steeper, brushier terrain, Dugger said.

"We do expect wolves to change the way cougars use the landscape," Dugger said.

Judge overturns 'test case' logging project

White Castle timber sale opposed by environmentalists

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

A federal judge has overturned the approval of a timber project that environmentalists claim is a "test case" for increased logging of mature forests.

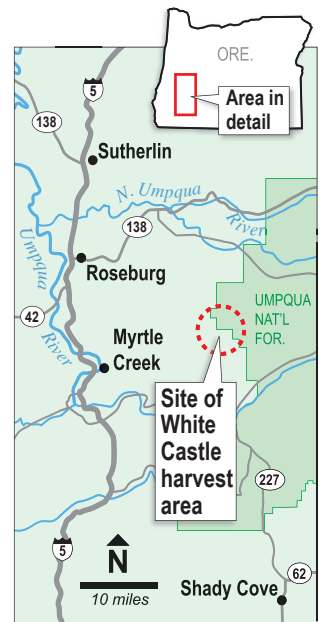
The White Castle project calls for harvesting trees up to 110 years old on 187 acres of U.S. Bureau of Land Management property near Myrtle Creek, Ore.

The BLM intended for the project to demonstrate the "variable retention" model, in which patches of trees are harvested to recreate "early successional" habitat consisting of shrubs and other plant life.

While the agency argued the technique will improve the forest's diversity and resilience, Oregon Wild and Cascadia Wildlands equated it with a return to clear-cutting federal forests and filed a lawsuit to stop the timber sale.

U.S. District Judge Ann Aiken has now agreed with the environmental groups that BLM violated the National Environmental Policy Act by not conducting an in-depth scientific review of the project, known as an environmental impact statement or EIS.

"The project may be relatively small in size but it will adversely affect the northern spotted owl. Moreover, it represents a pilot test with effects that are likely to be highly controversial, highly uncertain and influential on future project planning," Aiken said.



Capital Press graphic

The judge has vacated BLM's approval of the project, which means logging cannot proceed until the agency completes the EIS and cor-

rects other shortcomings she identified.

In the agency's existing environmental analysis, BLM failed to consider enough alternatives to removing trees older than 80 years old, Aiken said.

BLM should also have conducted a more extensive EIS because the project was subject to "scientific controversy" since its inception about possible effects on the spotted owl, a federally protected threatened species, she said.

Aside from the project's uncertainties, Aiken also cited its precedential effect as a reason for further study.

While the BLM would not be required to follow the White Castle project's example, the case was intended to test a more aggressive harvest approach that could replace the agency's current risk-averse focus on thinning, she said.

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