Washington

Ecology urged to change drought well regulations

Agency says conditions must get worse before groundwater tapped

By DON JENKINS Capital Press

OLYMPIA — A Central Washington lawmaker April 1 said the Department of Ecology should immediately let farmers pump from emergency wells, a step the agency says it won't consider unless the drought gets worse.

Yakima County Rep. David Taylor said growers in his agriculture-rich district report already needing wells that were used with state approval in earlier droughts.

"That's what I'm hearing from folks," Taylor said after the initial meeting of the legislative drought committee.

The committee has little direct control over the DOE's drought response, but it provides a forum for lawmakers to ask questions.

DOE drought relief coordinator Jeff Marti said the state once had a "more lax posture toward drilling of emergency wells, and a lot of people came to depend on them during drought."

But the agency now views emergency wells as a desperate measure. Groundwater and surface waters are connected, and drawing from emergency wells will eventually impact



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Rep. David Taylor, R-Moxee, questions Washington Department of Ecology drought relief coordinator Jeff Marti at a legislative meeting April 1 in Olympia. Taylor challenged the agency's policy of withhold for now permission to use emergency wells.

streams, Marti said.

To prevent other water users from being shortchanged, every extra gallon drawn from the ground will have to be matched by an another gallon put into streams, he said.

"We want the impact to be essentially water-budget neutral, and, frankly, that's the only policy that's going to keep us out of the courts," Marti said.

DOE has asked lawmakers for \$4 million to buy water in the Yakima Basin for that purpose. But the agency won't spend the money unless the drought deepens

DOE can't say exactly how much worse the drought must be, though Marti said conditions will have to be "much more severe than what we're looking at currently."

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation forecasts junior water right holders in the Yakima Basin will receive 73 percent of their normal summer water supply.

DOE held two workshops this week in the Yakima Basin to explain how farmers can sell their water rights.

Drought committee chairman Sen. Jim Honeyford, R-Sunnyside, questioned whether water will be available to lease to let landowners use their emergency wells.

"They have drilled those wells at considerable expense, and in a water short year, how do you find water?" Honeyford asked. "It's a Catch-22. It's a dry year. You don't have any water

to offset, and they can't use the wells they have."

Marti agreed farmers could have trouble finding water rights to mitigate drawing from emergency wells. "You're right. The water is more scarce and expensive," he said.

In response to a question from Taylor, Marti said DOE does not consider crop value when fielding requests to use emergency wells.

"Our position is that regardless of crop type, unless the (groundwater) use is offset through mitigation, we're not going to be approving those types of wells," Marti said.

Taylor said he will continue to press DOE on its policy on emergency wells. "It's not addressing the need," he said.

Fertilizer removed from train bill

Farm lobbyists happy

By DON JENKINS Capital Press

OLYMPIA — House Democrats have stricken anhydrous ammonia, a widely used nitrogen fertilizer, from a bill motivated by the influx of rail tankers hauling Bakken crude oil to West Coast refineries.

"I'm glad the House Environment Committee heard our concerns and amended the bill to minimize the impact on agriculture," Washington Farm Bureau associate director of governmental relations Scott Dilley said.

Lawmakers have been working on legislation to help fire departments and communities respond to potentially explosive derailments.

Senate Bill 5057's provisions include mandating larger crews for trains carrying hazardous materials. Railroad unions say additional crew members would be in position to decouple burning rail cars, while railroad companies say larger crews are unnecessary and may conflict with federal rules.

A Senate floor amendment extended the staffing requirement to trains hauling anhydrous ammonia.

The amendment, which passed over the opposition of Senate Republican leaders, pulled agricultural groups into what had been a debate about regulating oil tankers.

Farm lobbyists, concerned the bill would increase the cost of transporting fertilizer, argued anhydrous ammonia didn't belong in the bill.

The chemical, though haz-



Don Jenkins/Capital Press
Rail cars roll past a crossing
guard on the BNSF Railway
mainline in southwest Washington. A bill focused on tankers
hauling crude oil was amended
in the state Senate to cover
anhydrous ammonia, a nitrogen-based fertilizer. A House
committee has now removed
fertilizer cars from the bill.

ardous, isn't explosive. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, leaking anhydrous ammonia rapidly expands into a heavier-than-air cloud that causes breathing difficulties and burns.

The House Environment Committee dropped anhydrous ammonia from the bill when it amended and then passed SB 5057 on March 30. The full House has yet to vote on bill. If it passes, the Senate will have to agree to the changes.

The bill could apply to farm chemicals that are flammable.

"Over the next couple of weeks, I expect more discussion will take place on the competing ideas from the House and Senate on how to address the bill's central topic — transportation of crude oil," Dilley said. "We'll continue to work to ensure that any resulting legislation doesn't increase costs for farmers. The House committee's actions were certainly a step in the right direction."



Don Jenkins/Capital Press f CHS Inc.'s global as-

A grain elevator at the Port of Kalama on the Columbia River in Washington is one of CHS Inc.'s global assets. Whatcom Farmers Cooperative in northwest Washington will merge with CHS in hopes of expanding.

Wash. co-op, CHS merge

By DON JENKINS Capital Press

A northwest Washington farmers cooperative that has ambitions to grow has agreed to merge with global agribusiness giant CHS Inc.

Whatcom Farmers Cooperative, which has 205 voting producers, will join a company that reported a net income of \$1.1 billion on revenue of \$42.7 billion for the fiscal year ending Aug. 31.

The Lynden-based WFC anticipates CHS' resources, expertise and financial services will help it overcome barriers and expand outside its corner of the state.

WFC has seven retail outlets in Whatcom County, distributes propane and petroleum fuels, and sells agronomy products and services direct to farmers.

"We're stuck up in the corner (of the state). Our ability to grow is pretty limited right now," said WFC board president Jeff Bedlington, a Lynden grower.

WFC and CHS announced the merger in a press release April 6 Terms of the merger were not disclosed. WFC's producers have approved the merger, which must get final approval from the CHS board of directors before becoming effective in July.

Minnesota-based CHS has some 1,100 member cooperatives and 84,500 individual members. The company announced in February it was paying out \$581 million in cash dividends to its members.

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Some 2,540 members shared \$8.4 million in Washington, while 1,701 members divided \$4.7 million in Idaho and 427 members divvied up \$3.3 million in Oregon.

WFC was founded in 1941. Cooperative officials said they spent more than a year studying whether to merge with CHS. "The decision wasn't made quickly," said WFC General Manager Don Eucker, who will retain his position.

Eucker said that with CHS'

help, the Whatcom cooperative may be able to expand its agronomy business into Canada and farther south in Washington.

WFC will maintain its retail outlets and will continue to have control over its assets, he said.

"From an outside standpoint, the transition is going to be very seamless," Eucker said.

The merger will expand CHS' presence in the West, company spokeswoman Lisa Graham-Peterson said. "We continue to look for expansion in that area of Washington to serve farmers," she said.

CHS was formed in 1998 by the merger of Cenex Inc. and Harvest States Cooperatives. The company's wide-ranging agriculture and energy enterprises include oil and ethanol refineries, grain terminals, convenience stores, and food processing and fertilizer plants. CHS shares ownership with Cargill Inc. of grain elevators at the Portland, Tacoma and Kalama, Wash., ports.

Apple Blossom Festival honors Brunner WENATCHEE, Wash. instrumental in helping the tree fruit industry shift into

the Washington State University Tree Fruit Research and Extension Center in Wenatchee, has been named Apple Citizen of the Year by the Washington State Apple Blossom Festival.

Brunner has been an entomologist at the center for 36 years and is retiring in September.

Among other accomplishments, Brunner was

instrumental in helping the tree fruit industry shift into integrated pest management, specifically pheromone mating disruption as a biological means of combating codling moth, a major apple and pear pest.

Brunner will be honored

at the festival's All Service Club Luncheon on April 29 and will ride in the Stemilt Growers Grand Parade on May 2.

— Dan Wheat



Dan Wheat/Capital Press Jay Brunner holds the Washington State Horticultural Association's Silver Apple Award given to him in 2005. He is being honored this year by the Washington State Apple Blossom Festival.

