

Ecology Dept. proposes rules for irrigating with reclaimed water

Agency says policy has potential to help in drought years

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

The Washington Department of Ecology has proposed rules for irrigating with water that's not quite up to drinking standards.

The rules also cover urban uses, such as watering golf courses or highway medians, for "reclaimed water" — wastewater that's been treated to remove most impurities, but doesn't qualify as potable water.

Statewide, 28 water treatment plants already have state-issued permits to sell reclaimed water for purposes such as industrial processes, watering lawns and irrigating poplar trees.



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

The city of Chehalis in southwest Washington uses wastewater that has been treated but not to drinking standards to irrigate a 250-acre poplar tree farm. The Washington Department of Ecology hopes to encourage more irrigation with recycled water.

DOE says the new rules will streamline obtaining permits and encourage more recycling of water, alleviating water shortages and reducing the amount of wastewater that's dumped into Puget Sound and elsewhere.

By coincidence, the rules

have been circulated for comment during Washington's first statewide drought in a decade.

Dennis McDonald, the reclaim water rule coordinator, said the drought has heightened interest in reclaimed water, especially in Western Washington.

"Eastern Washington has always been aware of the potential for drought," he said. "In Western Washington, where we keep saying we get enough rain all the time, this weather pattern is causing us to rethink."

McDonald said irrigating farmland is the biggest potential use for reclaimed water, though there are major obstacles.

Drawing reclaimed water that would otherwise flow downriver could impair water rights.

The rule will prohibit interfering with the supply or quality of water, unless the person with the impaired water right agrees to compensation.

Whether local jurisdictions are willing to develop ways to deliver reclaimed water will come down to economics, McDonald said. "I think it's going to be driven by the scarcity of water."

Washington State Water Resources Association government relations consultant Mike Schwisow, a lobbyist for irrigation districts, said he doesn't know of any district that directly diverts reclaimed water. Although the water may be safe, farmers are sensitive to how consumers will react.

"Public perception could have such a dramatic ability to market your crops," he said.

Washington Farm Bureau associate director of governmental relations Evan Sheffels agreed. "If they (customers) aren't going to feel good about it, we aren't going to feel good about it," he said.

Farmers using reclaimed water also would need to be concerned about not running afoul of the federal Food Safety Modernization Act, Sheffels said.

DOE's proposed rules closely follow guidelines ecol-

ogy and the state Department of Health adopted in 1997.

The rules classify reclaimed water as either Class A or Class B. Class A non-potable water could be used much like potable water to irrigate. There are more restrictions on Class B reclaimed water.

Uses for Class B water include:

- To protect orchards from frost, providing the fruit wasn't picked for at least 15 days.
- To irrigate trees, fiber, fodder and seed crops, and pastures not grazed by milk cows.
- To water food crops that are processed to destroy all pathogens.
- To irrigate fruit that does not contact the water or the ground.

DOE will take comments on the rules until Aug. 21. More information is posted on the agency's website, www.ecy.wa.gov



Photo submitted

Idaho ranchers Mabel and Grant Dobbs meet with musician Willie Nelson prior to his June 19 concert in Nampa, Idaho, to discuss concerns about agriculture. Nelson is a founder of Farm Aid, which works to keep family farms in business.

Idaho ranchers take ag concerns to Willie Nelson

By **JOHN O'CONNELL**
Capital Press

NAMPA, Idaho — Idaho ranchers Mabel and Grant Dobbs had 15 minutes inside Willie Nelson's tour bus to discuss pressing challenges in agriculture while one of their favorite entertainers nodded in agreement.

The brief meeting prior to Nelson's June 19 concert here was arranged by staff with Farm Aid, an organization devoted to protecting the family farm, founded by Nelson and fellow musicians Neil Young and John Mellencamp.

According to Farm Aid staff, Nelson was concerned about the stories of struggling farmers he met on the road in the 1980s when he formed the organization and still prioritizes meeting with agricultural producers when he tours.

Mabel and Grant, of Weiser, spoke with Nelson on behalf of the Idaho Organization of Resource Councils and its parent organization, the Western Organization of Resource Councils. Mabel said Farm Aid has offered grants to both organizations, including for an Idaho campaign to enact legislation governing sales of home-produced "cottage" food products.

That bill stalled in the Legislature, so IORC is backing a rule-making process by Idaho's health districts to clarify which cottage products are allowed and policies regarding their production. A public comment

period on the rule-making process ends July 24.

Mabel became involved in WORC in the late 1980s, assisting in its efforts to help farmers cope with credit challenges, prompted by personal experience. She and her husband had struggled to stay in business, having expanded their ranch property just before a farm credit crisis. They advocated for legislation to force banks to mediate with producers and seek to find alternate means to resolve credit issues before foreclosure.

Mabel said the bill failed and "thousands of farmers and ranchers went down." As they seek to transfer their farm and ranch to their youngest daughter, Mabel said producers still face many of the same challenges.

Mabel told Nelson, "You started Farm Aid 30 years ago. I got involved 28 years ago, and the fight goes on. You and I are getting much older, but the need is still there."

Mabel and Grant also addressed water quality, the need for more transparent deliberations regarding trade agreements, the lack of transparency in livestock markets and country of origin labeling on meat.

Mabel opposes ongoing efforts in Congress to repeal country-of-origin labeling, believing it provides useful information to the consumer, while the law's critics fear trade retaliation from Canada and Mexico.

Tomato harvests underway amid heat wave

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

REDDING, Calif. — The harvests of fresh-market and processing tomatoes are underway in California as growers report good quality despite the drought and summer heat.

Some early tomato varieties in Fresno County were showing sunburn as growers prepared to begin picking them and sending them to canneries, the National Agricultural Statistics Service reported. Later fields were setting fruit last week and growers with available water were heavily irrigating, according to the agency.

Tomato processors in California anticipate contracts for 14.3 million tons in 2015, a 2 percent increase from the final contracted production last year, NASS reported. While last year's initial predictions raised eyebrows among some growers before coming to fruition, Winters, Calif., farmer Bruce Rominger isn't about to second-guess this year's prediction.

"I don't want to take a guess what the yields are going to be like," said Rominger, board chairman of the



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Erin Fennell of Julia's Fruit Stand in Dairyville, Calif., sells heirloom tomatoes at a farmers' market in Redding, Calif., on June 28. The harvests of fresh and processing tomatoes are underway in California.

California Tomato Growers Association. "It seems like a decent crop — about average. ... We're going to find out pretty early what yields are going to be like."

The projected harvested acreage of processing tomatoes is 295,000 acres, about 2 percent more than last year's final total of 289,000 productive acres, according to NASS. The expectations come as

much of growers' success again this year will hinge on the performance of wells for those who won't have much or any surface water.

Fresno County will remain the top processing tomato-growing county with 91,000 acres, followed by Yolo, Kings, San Joaquin and Merced counties, according to the survey funded by the California League of Food

Processors. The top five counties represent 73 percent of the planted acreage statewide, NASS reported.

The harvest has also begun for fresh-market tomato growers including Julia's Fruit Stand in Dairyville, Calif., which specializes in heirloom tomatoes and sells produce at farmers' markets throughout the northern Sacramento Valley.

Barley commission sets conservative budget

By **SEAN ELLIS**
Capital Press

BOISE — The Idaho Barley Commission will finish fiscal year 2015 in better financial shape than it had anticipated and board members have chosen to set a conservative budget for fiscal year 2016.

The conservative approach was taken because of huge losses the industry suffered last year when heavy August rains pummeled much of the crop in Eastern and Southern Idaho.

The losses were estimated at about \$60 million.

IBC Administrator Kelly Olson projects the state's barley growers will produce 53 million bushels this year, generating \$688,000 in state barley tax revenue.

The IBC's four-member

board has set the fiscal 2016 budget at \$573,000, which means it will be able to increase the reserve fund from \$420,000 to \$535,000.

"It would be nice to get our reserves up again in case in the future we have another train wreck," said IBC Chairman Tim Dillon.

Olson said the board felt strongly about being cautious heading into fiscal 2016, which began July 1.

"After coming off a really bad year, you can't afford to be in the hole for a second consecutive year," she said. "It's a very conservative budget."

To give it some breathing room in fiscal 2016, the commission this year will give University of Idaho only half of the \$200,000 it has committed annually for five years to fund a \$1

million research endowment.

A clause in the endowment agreement allows the commission to take such a step if it faces a financial challenge, as it did this year.

The commission will still fund the endowment, it just might take longer, Olson said.

"We're honoring our commitment, we're just having to extend it," she said.

Commissioners will revisit the 2016 budget in October and if revenue for this year's crop comes in higher than expected, may revise it upward.

The IBC will make its 2015 endowment payment in October instead of July as usual, allowing the commission to pay more than \$100,000 if income is higher than expected.

"I'd like to see us still pay it off in five years," Dillon said.

The commission will end fiscal 2015 in better shape than it had estimated in October.

Olson projects the IBC will end the year with \$552,000 in barley tax revenue, which is \$23,000 more than was estimated in October.

The commission will draw down its reserve fund by \$89,000 this year, which is less than the \$151,000 projected in October.

The IBC trimmed its 2015 budget and has been extremely cautious with expenses, Olson said.

For example, it cut funding to all the research projects it funds by at least 10 percent in February.

"We implemented austerity and that has benefited us as we close out this fiscal year," she said.

WSDA works to eliminate invading Mediterranean snails

Pest biologist provides outreach to growers

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

The Washington State Department of Agriculture continues its efforts to ensure an invading species of snails from Europe don't get beyond land in the Port of Tacoma to infect the rest of the state's agriculture.

The department has reduced an isolated population of Mediterranean snails, also known as vineyard snails, on grass fields at the Port of Tacoma, said Jenni Cena, pest biologist for the department's plant protection division in Olympia.

It's unknown how the snails originally got to the



Courtesy Washington State Department of Agriculture

The Washington State Department of Agriculture continues its work to reduce an infestation of Mediterranean snails, pictured here in 2009, on land near the Port of Tacoma. Department pest biologist Jenni Cena provides outreach to farmers to keep possible introductions to wheat fields in Eastern Washington small and isolated.

port, Cena said, but the snails likely came off a container.

The department found the snails in November 2005. Originally, the impacted area

was 300 acres, and the department has reduced it to 40 acres, Cena said.

"This year, we only found two snails, and last year we

only found 20 snails," she said.

Even when a property is snail-free, it takes two to three more years of data before it can officially be declared, she said.

"Snails aren't simple," she said. "You have to remove the vegetation as a food source, you have to remove debris so they can't hide out."

The snails are a pest in Australian wheat production, and the department wants to make sure they doesn't become a pest in Eastern Washington wheat production. Snails are so prevalent in some places in Australia that they can gum up machinery, Cena said.

No Mediterranean snails have ever been found in Washington wheat fields, said Mike Louisell, public information officer for the

department.

"There's always a risk for a pest that is destructive to agriculture to get to any of the 50 states," he said. "We're aware of the pest threat and right now it is well under containment."

According to the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, snails contaminate pasture and fodder, with livestock rejecting heavily contaminated pasture and hay. Snails eat decayed organic matter and cereal, canola and pulse crop seedlings.

Infestation would limit farmers' ability to export their product, Cena said.

The department works with stakeholders and cleans and inspects any equipment that comes off the affected property. USDA dogs have been used at the port to find snails in the past.

"Unfortunately, we have constant reintroduction from the various ports," she said. "They like to hitchhike on containers."

Longshoremen at the Port of Tacoma and Seattle use salt to create a barrier around containers where the snails are found, and the containers are fumigated or shipped back. But only a small percentage of containers are inspected, Cena said.

"Introduction is always a risk," she said.

She hopes to provide outreach to the wheat industry, in an effort to keep infestations isolated and limited. The department conducts a limited survey for snails each year.

"The more eyes we have out there, the higher the possibility of finding an introduction, say, in a wheat field," she said.