Canal expansion progresses in Odessa Subarea

Courtesy of Amanda Brack, Columbia Basin Development League

Members of the media take a tour July 29 to get a closer look at construction of the Lind Coulee Siphon Project near Warden, Wash.

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Water deliveries from the Columbia River are already being made to some farmers in the Odessa Subarea.

The East Columbia Basin Irrigation District has begun writing water service contracts with farmers in that area for irrigation water, said development coordinator Levi Johnson.

Deep-well irrigation on 2,000 acres in the subarea is being replaced using surface water, Johnson said.

The deliveries are the latest in a series of efforts to bring water from the Columbia River to farmers affected by rapidly declining aquifers. Farmers have been forced them to drill deeper irrigation wells or watch them run dry.

Overall, 87,000 acres of irrigated farm land are eligible to receive water from the federal Columbia Basin Project.

The irrigation district is designing a 47.5-mile delivery system on the East Low Canal. It would deliver river water to 10,000 acres of farmland. Environmental reviews are underway, Johnson said.

Six pipeline systems to deliver water from the canal to individual farms are also in the works.

"The critical point is to secure tax-exempt revenue bonds to get the capital necessary to build that system," Johnson said. The district hopes to begin construction on it in the winter.

The project also includes an expansion of the canal, said Mike Schwisow, director of government relations for the Columbia Basin Development League.

A $26 million state grant to the irrigation district covers more than 50 percent of the cost of the canal expansion, including new county road bridges, Schwisow said. How much gets done depends on the contractor bids for the various aspects of the project, Schwisow said.

Once the state grant is used, the league hopes to get federal funding for the canal expansion portion, Schwisow said.

Bids for the first two siphons came in below engineering estimates, less than $15 million compared to more than $20 million that was projected, Schwisow said.

The irrigation district did the excavation work in-house, Schwisow said.

"We feel like we can perform that work more efficiently and at a lower cost than a traditional, federally run construction project," Johnson said.

Landowners will pay for the distribution portion of the project, Schwisow said.

The original estimated cost of the project was more than $700 million for the distribution system and $75 million for the canal expansion.

"The district's experience and all the work they have done now, taking a hypothetical from several years ago to reality, is much, much lower," Schwisow said.

Sweet corn big business in Columbia Basin

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

GEORGE, Wash. — The air conditioning in the cab of Kyle Bushman's corn combine got its workout that day. Temperatures exceeded 100 degrees all afternoon on July 31.

It was just another long, hot day near the front end of Washington's 2 1/2-month harvest of sweet corn.

Bushman, 36, of Quincy, Wash., is in his eighth year on a harvest crew for Quincy Foods LLC, a subsidiary of Norpac Foods of Stayton, Ore.

It took him only 10 minutes or so to cut and collect another eight tons of corn in the hopper of the Oxbo Legacy combine and head to the truck to dump it.

He saddled the big machine ever so close up to the side of the truck so no ears of corn would spill to the ground.

"I try to get within 3 inches. Usually, once a season a truck tire gets punctured (from a cone of the combine cutter)," Bushman said.

Sweet corn is big business in Washington — perhaps bigger than most people realize. The state usually ranks second in processed sweet corn to Minnesota. Processed corn is canned or frozen.

In 2014, Washington harvested 692,000 tons of processed sweet corn from 69,400 acres, valued at $74.7 million, according to USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Minnesota harvested 749,440 tons from 109,400 acres, valued at $84.8 million. Wisconsin was third at 542,160 tons on 65,800 acres and valued at $52.2 million.

Oregon rounded out the top states at 220,480 tons from 23,200 acres, valued at $27.8 million. A lot is grown in the Oregon's Willamette Valley.

U.S. totals were 2.6 million tons, 312,280 acres and $289.6 million in value.

Washington's sweet corn is mostly grown in the upper and lower Columbia Basin, plus some in the Yakima Valley and on the west side of the state near Chehalis.

Upper Columbia Basin processors are National Frozen Foods in Moses Lake and Quincy Foods in Quincy. Harvest usually begins Aug. 1. But as with so many crops this year, a mild winter and warm spring moved things along early.

"We started July 15. That's our earliest ever," said Brian O'Shea, field department manager of Quincy Foods.

"Normally, we go to the middle of October. This year, we could be done a little sooner," he said.

The company is contracted to harvest sweet corn on 6,000 acres. Yield will average 11 tons to the acre. Quincy Foods pays growers an average of $95 per ton. Harvest area runs from Moses Lake to Quincy and south to Royal Slope.

Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Combines dump sweet corn into a truck in a field near George, Wash., on July 31, for hauling to Quincy Foods for freezing. Washington is typically second to Minnesota in processed sweet corn.

"National probably does twice as many acres and at least double the volume in the same geographic area," O'Shea said.

Quincy Foods harvests around the clock, seven days a week. Crews work 12-hour shifts. Each crew has three combine operators, a mechanic, an assistant mechanic and a foreman. Trucking is contracted out. The corn is hauled, 28 tons per truck, to the plant in Quincy, where it is cut off the cob and frozen or frozen on natural-length cobs, 5.5-inch cobs or 3-inch cobbets. It is packed and shipped throughout the year, domestic and export.

"This year, we're maturing corn faster than we ever have," O'Shea said. "It's the warm nights."

The nearby Washington State University AgWeatherNet station at Frenchman Hills measured 1,781 heat units season-to-date on July 28. That compares with 1,376 a year earlier and about 1,250 on a 20-year average, he said.

"The Midwest has more acres and volume, but our yield per acre is some of the best in the nation," O'Shea said. "Last year, we were 11 tons per acre or close to it. The Midwest averages about 7."

Apple, pear harvests off to early start

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

SELAH, Wash. — Washington's 2015 apple and pear harvests are starting about 10 days earlier than usual, and the big questions that lie ahead are the impacts of excessive heat, drought and not enough labor.

Fruit is expected to be smaller because of the heat and drought. Smaller fruit means smaller crops. Sunburn damages fruit, increasing cullage, and finding an adequate number of pickers is always a concern.

Matson Fruit Co. of Selah began picking Ginger Gold apples in Mattawa on July 25. That compares with July 27 two years ago and Aug. 12 in 2011, said Erin Smith, Rainier Fruit Co. spokeswoman. Rainier sells fruit for Matson.

Bartlett pear harvest starts soon in the Yakima Valley, and the Gala apple harvest is expected to start Aug. 5 in Mattawa.

Harvests will accelerate rapidly because of the heat, said Tim Smith, Washington State University Extension tree fruit specialist emeritus in Wenatchee. Fruit at higher elevations will fare better because of lower temperatures, he said.

Harvest timing will be more compressed, increasing the demand for pickers, said Jon Alegria, president of CPC International Apple Co. of Tieton. Pear harvest usually wraps up in early October and apple harvest ends in early November.

"The last couple of years, Indian summers through October have allowed us to get fruit off. The concern is getting it off before a freeze. There's definitely not enough labor out there. Even in cherries, some warehouses were short," Alegria said.

Many crops have been early this year because of a light winter and warm spring. But too much summer heat can slow things down.

July 2014 was the hottest July on record in Central Washington and this year's June was the hottest June, said Nicholas Loyd, meteorologist for WSU AgWeatherNet in Prosser.

AgWeatherNet's station on Whitcomb Island in the Columbia River south of Pasco recorded 100 degrees or above for 14 days, June 26 through July 9.

"That's a pretty impressive streak," Loyd said.

Highs were more normal, around 90, from July 10 through 24. Temperatures cooled July 25 through 28 and then returned to triple digits. The summer could still be a record for heat, depending on August, Loyd said.

"With all that heat, I was afraid fruit would ripen with no color. But the cool-down brought on some color," said Charles Lyall, a Mattawa grower.

Apples quit growing in triple-digit heat and color doesn't develop, Lyall said. Cullage also increases, with apples scabbing from sunburn, he said.

"Overhead cooling (watering) helps keep sunburn at acceptable rates but when it gets that hot you're just kind of hanging on," Lyall said.

"The concern is a lot of smaller, lower-color Gala coming onto the market this year," said his brother, Frank Lyall.

Growers are using sunburn protection products, including Surround, Raynox and Diffusion, on the more sun exposed portions of orchards. A kaolin clay and oil, Surround is used in early spring for pest control on pears.

"There will be sunburn out there, but in all honesty it hasn't been that bad. Some areas are worse than others, depending on tools to handle it," Alegria said.

"We had heat when fruit was smaller, so hopefully that's not as bad. We're having great nighttime temperatures so things are looking OK out there. I think we'll have better color than last year. The million-dollar question is the weather of the next 30 to 60 days," he said.

Water panel praised for informational workshops and input on bond funds

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

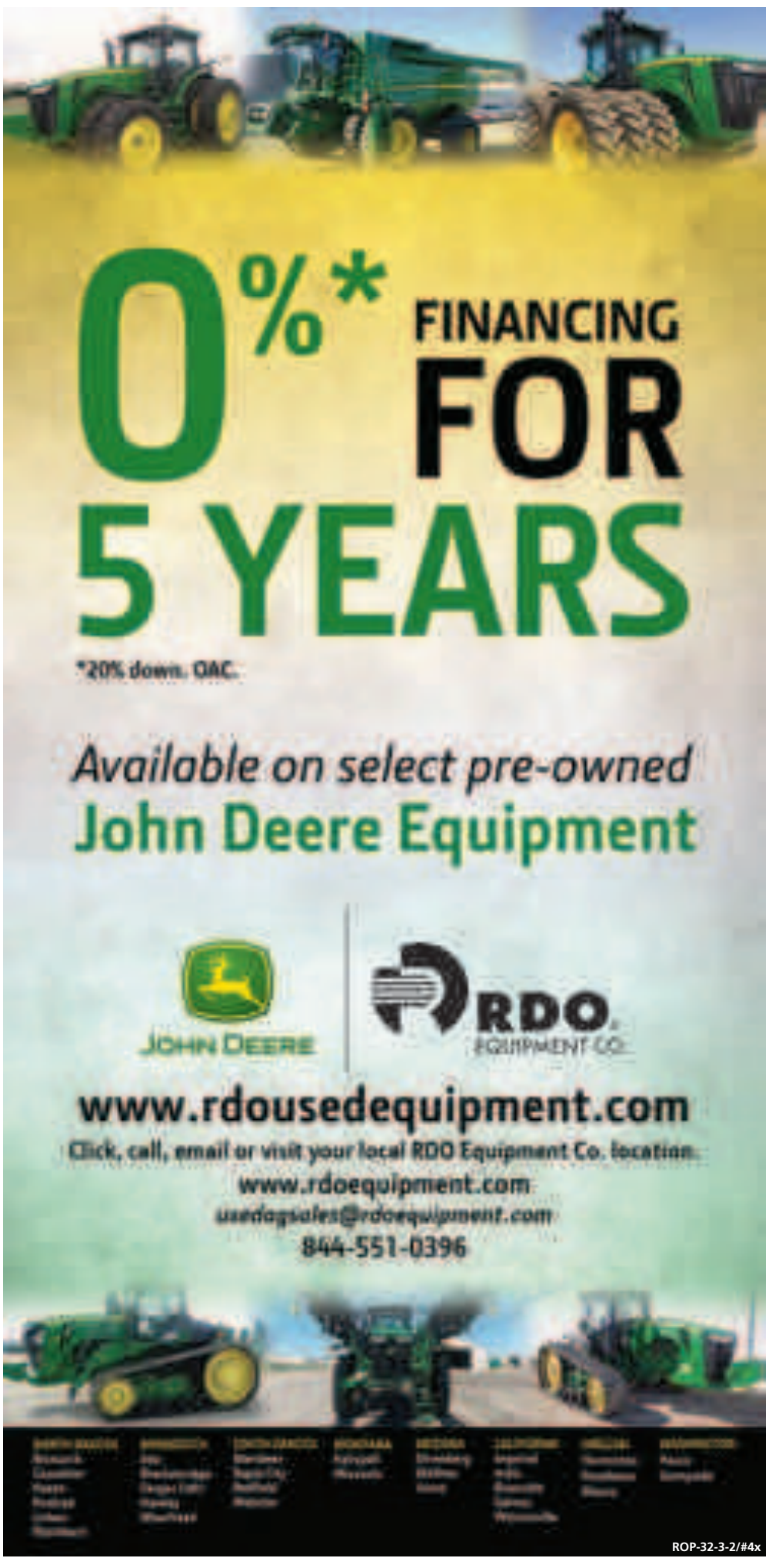
WILLOWS, Calif. — The newly hired leader of an agency trying to build a new reservoir in Northern California is praising the state for involving the public as it plans to distribute bond funds.

The California Water Commission, which is tasked with choosing $2.7 billion in storage projects amid the $7.5 billion water bond approved by voters in November, recently held informational workshops in Napa and Davis. The final workshop is slated for 6 p.m. Aug. 10 at the Bakersfield Senior Center, 530 Fourth St.

Jim Watson, general manager of the Sites Project Joint Powers Authority, said he attended the Napa and Davis meetings and was impressed by the lengths to which the commission is going to gather public input.

"Both meetings I thought went really well," Watson said. "There were some very good questions being asked by the public that I think will inform the staff's development of the regulations.

"This was the first presentation of the thought process for identifying the public benefits" the water commission will seek in proposals, he said.

The workshops July 27 in Napa and July 30 in Davis sought to educate participants and gather suggestions on the timeline for selecting projects and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife's and State Water Resources Control Board's ecosystem and water-quality priorities, the commission's website explained.

The commission expects to have draft guidelines for review and comment later this summer.