

Otter addresses water management, wildfire issues

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — When it comes to issues that affect farmers and ranchers, water management and fighting wildfires were significant themes in Gov. Butch Otter's Jan. 11 state of the state address.

The governor's proposed budget encourages lawmakers to provide a significant amount of funding for both of those issues.

During his 40-minute address, Otter praised the recent agreement between groundwater and surface water users aimed at reversing declining levels in the East-

ern Snake Plain Aquifer.

The agreement is a result of a water call by the seven-member Surface Water Coalition, which claimed their senior water rights were being negatively affected by the well pumping of junior water right holders.

Groups representing almost 1 million well-irrigated acres in the ESPA agreed to reduce groundwater use by 11 percent and the agreement will protect them from future curtailment related to the water call.

A study by University of Idaho agricultural economists showed that a ma-

major water curtailment in the ESPA could result in the state losing hundreds of millions of dollars in agricultural activity.

"This historic settlement between the Surface Water Coalition and groundwater users will help ensure that the aquifer is a healthy and reliable resource now and well into the future," Otter said. "In fact, I would encourage others who are at odds over apportioning scarce resources to use this agreement as a template for addressing their own conflicts."

Otter's mention of the agreement received loud ap-

plause from legislators.

Otter thanked Speaker of the House Scott Bedke, an Oakley rancher; Sen. Steve Bair, a Blackfoot farmer; and Idaho Water Resource Board Chairman Roger Chase "for your efforts in bringing two water-user groups together to finally settle delivery calls from the (ESPA)."

The governor's proposed budget asks for \$546,000 to create four new Idaho Department of Water Resources positions to implement and enforce the agreement, which requires flow meters to be installed on 4,000 wells within the ESPA by 2018.

Otter, a rancher, also praised the firefighting efforts of the state's six rangeland fire protection associations and his budget requests \$140,000 to provide personal protective equipment, communications equipment and training materials for the two to four additional RFPAs expected to form in the next few years.

Some of the \$500,000 that Otter is requesting to fund his sage grouse initiative will be used to support the existing RFPAs, which the governor said are protecting 951,000 acres of private rangeland and helping

protect 4.8 million acres of federal and state land.

"Their knowledge of the landscape has proven to be an invaluable asset to the (state and federal government) in quickly suppressing wildfires," Otter said.

Otter asked lawmakers for \$920,000 in additional funding "to beef up the Idaho Department of Land's wildfire program with a focus on improving initial response."

The governor's budget also asks for \$325,000 for incentive and start-up grants to enhance high school level agricultural education and natural resource programs.

Lean meat makes the cut in dietary guidelines

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

Organizations representing the U.S. meat industry are pleased with the fare served up in the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which recommend 26 ounces of lean meat, poultry and eggs per week in a healthful 2,000 calorie-a-day diet.

Meat producers and processors came out with gloves off last February when the DGA Advisory Committee recommended Americans needed to lower their intake of red and processed meat, contending the committee ignored data showing the health benefits of beef and pork.

USDA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services didn't follow that recommendation and kept the guideline for the meat group at the previous level.

National Cattlemen's Beef Association and North American Meat Association applauded the agencies for ensuring the final recommendations — affirming the nutrition of meat — were based on science.

"I was really glad to see the nutritional guidelines recognize all the strong science that supports the role that beef plays in a healthy diet," Richard Thorpe, a physician and Texas cattle producer, said in a video posted by NCBA.

"There have been tremendous amounts of research and scientific evidence on the value and nutrition of beef and today, not only do you get to enjoy the great taste of beef but you also can be very confident that it's very healthy for you," he said.

Meat and poultry products are among the most nutrient-dense foods available and are rich sources of complete protein, iron, zinc and B vitamins, Meat Institute President and CEO Barry Carpenter said in a written statement.

"The dietary guidelines confirm that a variety of dietary patterns can be followed to achieve a healthy eating pattern. Consumers who choose to eat meat and poultry, as 95 percent of Americans do, can continue to enjoy our products as they have in the past," he said.

Meat consumption wasn't completely unscathed in the guidelines, however. The agencies advised some individuals, especially teen boys and adult men, need to reduce overall consumption of protein by decreasing their intake of meat, poultry and eggs and increasing intakes of vegetables and other under-consumed food groups.

They also said while average intake of total protein foods is close to recommendations, average seafood intake is below recommendations for all age groups and shifts are needed within the protein foods group to increase seafood intake.

The guidelines also came with a warning of sorts.

"Strong evidence from mostly prospective cohort studies but also randomized controlled trials has shown that eating patterns that include lower intake of meats as well as processed meats and processed poultry are associated with reduced risk of CVD (cardiovascular disease) in adults."

Idaho pushes for greater recharge funding

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BOISE — Water experts laud Idaho Gov. Butch Otter for proposing stable funding to conduct managed aquifer recharge into the future but worry the amount he's suggested would be insufficient to meet the state's commitments.

During his annual State of the State message on Jan. 11, Otter proposed to budget \$10 million in one-time funding and \$2 million annually, both from the state's general fund, toward aquifer stabilization projects. Beginning on July 1 with the start of the next fiscal year, the ongoing funding would replace \$5 million in cigarette tax revenue the state has allocated for recharge during the past two years.

State officials have vowed to conduct 250,000 acre-feet of annual recharge — which entails intentionally injecting surplus surface water into the groundwater table — to reverse declining levels in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer.

During an Oct. 16 presentation to the state's Natural Resources Interim Committee, Idaho Department of Water Resources Planning Division Chief Brian Patton estimated the state will need \$30 million to finance construction of infrastructure to increase Idaho's recharge capacity enough to meet the goal. Furthermore, Patton estimated the state will need \$3 million in ongoing funding



Courtesy of Idaho Department of Water Resources

Work is done Dec. 14 on the Egin Lakes recharge canal, which will access the Egin Bench recharge site near Rexburg, Idaho. It's one of many ongoing projects to improve the state's capacity to purposely inject surface water into the aquifer to replenish declining groundwater levels.

to cover maintenance costs and "wheeling fees," paid to canal companies that run the state's water through their unlined canals or into special spill basins so that it may seep into the aquifer.

Lawmakers have been seeking a long-term funding source to move recharge efforts away from the cigarette tax, scheduled to sunset in 2019.

"It would be more appropriate to have those dollars come from the general fund, as opposed to a cigarette tax, to which there is little nexus with aquifer recharge," said Sen. Steve Bair, R-Blackfoot.

Bair said he's grateful Otter's plan offers "front-loaded support to quickly build the recharge program," but he acknowledged the state will need substantially more than \$2 million per year in ongoing funds to support wheeling fees and maintenance.

"A weakness in the governor's program is for recharge six plus years down the road," Bair said. "There is an idea among some legislators to appropriate a larger amount than \$2 million per year."

Bair said he and House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oak-

ley, will be working to establish the proper funding amount. Bair said it's uncertain if the Legislature will ultimately approve funding beyond Otter's request.

Eastern Snake Plain well users have also agreed, under terms of a settlement with canal companies with the Surface Water Coalition, to reduce groundwater consumption by an average of 240,000 acre-feet per year, either by using less or conducting their own recharge projects.

Brian Olmstead, general manager of Twin Falls Canal Co., said the state's recharge

goal is critical to the success of the agreement and "\$2 million per year sounds awful light to me." Olmstead advised state leaders to pursue federal funds to help with some of the planned recharge infrastructure projects.

Patton said the state anticipates recharging 75,000 acre-feet with a public recharge water right in priority during winter from Minidoka Dam to Milner Dam — about the same volume as last winter. He said infrastructure projects currently underway should boost Idaho's recharge capacity to 120,000 acre-feet by next winter.

Agricultural groups hold labor conferences

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — Agricultural labor conferences abound in Central Washington and one is set in Oregon in the next few weeks.

First up is the Washington Growers League's annual meeting and labor conference, Jan. 26, at the Yakima Convention Center.

Craig Regelbrugge, senior vice president of AmericanHort, Washington, D.C., is among top speakers. AmericanHort formed two years

ago from the consolidation of the American Nursery & Landscape Association and the Association of Horticultural Professionals.

Regelbrugge previously was vice president of government relations for ANLA and was co-chairman of the Agricultural Coalition for Immigration Reform in 2013.

Kerry Scott, a program manager for Mas Labor, a foreign worker provider in Lovington, Va., and Brendan Monahan, a labor and agriculture attorney with the Stokes Lawrence law firm,

Yakima, also will speak.

The conference is from 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at the Yakima Convention Center. Registration and agenda: www.growersleague.org.

"We have a growing industry and along with it growing demand for labor," said Mike Gempler, the league's executive director in Yakima.

While H-2A-visa foreign guestworkers are helping seasonal labor supply, it still is tight and declining and qualified people are hard to find, Gempler said. It's es-

sential to look at the situation strategically and plan for the future, he said.

Immigration reform and how to deal with efforts by organized labor and foreign governments to place conditions on use of foreign labor will be discussed.

WAFLA, formerly known as the Washington Farm Labor Association, will hold workforce summits from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Jan. 26 at the Clackamas County Event Center in Canby, Ore., and at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Wash.,

Jan. 28. The summits focus on how seasonal employers can use the federal H-2A program. WAFLA is a provider. Housing, transportation, recruitment, wages and other aspects of the program will be explained.

WAFLA's annual labor conference will be at CWU, Feb. 18. Immigration, the Affordable Care Act, rest break pay for piece rate workers and proposals to increase the state's minimum wage will be discussed. For more information on that and the workforce summits: www.wafla.org.

No major ag bills expected during 2016 Idaho Legislature

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Idaho farm leaders and ag lobbyists say the 2016 Idaho Legislature could be a quiet session when it comes to agriculture.

But there are at least two controversial issues looming that could change that.

"We always have a lot of smaller bills but ... I don't see any major ag bills coming out of this session," said Sen. Jim Patrick, a Republican farmer from Twin Falls.

"Things can happen but right now I don't hear any rumblings that we need to do much."

Much of the debate during the legislative session, which kicked off Jan. 11, will likely center on education and health and welfare, said Sen. Jim Rice, R-Caldwell, chairman of the



Sean Ellis/Capital Press
Idaho's Capitol is shown Jan. 11, the kickoff date for the 2016 Idaho Legislature. Ag industry leaders say they don't anticipate any major farm-related legislation this year.

Senate Agricultural Affairs Committee.

"There's less likely to be much directly on agriculture," he said. "There will be a few things that will tend to be fair-

ly minor but I think more of the action will be in other areas."

But Milk Producers of Idaho Executive Director Brent Olmstead said that could change if the controversial issue of how flood control releases from Treasure Valley reservoirs are accounted for makes its way before lawmakers.

Treasure Valley irrigators say water released for flood control from reservoirs on the Boise River system should not be counted against stored water rights but the state says it should. The two sides are fighting that battle in court, and many stakeholders say they don't believe legislation is necessary.

But if lawmakers are asked to weigh in on the issue, "that would be a big debate," Olmstead said.

Rep. Ken Andrus, a Republican rancher from Lava

Hot Springs and chairman of the House Agricultural Affairs Committee, said the latest he's hearing on that issue is that "the recommendations of some people in leadership is to let the issue go through the courts before we do anything legislatively."

Andrus said he's also heard that a couple of animal welfare bills could be proposed. In 2013, Andrus authored legislation that would have defined animal torture and made a second offense of animal abuse a felony.

Idaho lawmakers in 2012 passed a bill that makes a third conviction for animal cruelty a felony. That legislation, which exempts production agriculture, came as a result of threats by animal rights groups to push a ballot initiative if Idaho didn't strengthen its animal welfare laws.

Andrus believes that

strengthening the law would prevent a ballot initiative.

Those groups want a first-offense felony and also to define neglect. Andrus believes not strengthening the state's animal welfare laws almost guarantees these groups will attempt a ballot initiative.

Andrus' legislation never got a hearing in the Senate agriculture committee because its chairman at the time, Sen. Steve Bair, a Republican farmer from Blackfoot, believed animal rights groups plan to chip away at the state's animal welfare laws until they hinder animal agriculture.

Rice said any bill similar to the one Andrus introduced in 2013 won't make it through his committee.

"I won't hear it," he said. "In my opinion, it's ... a step in the direction of trying to get rid of animal agriculture; death of a thousand cuts."