



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Southern Idaho farmers Kendall Jones, left, and Todd Garrett show the channel of the Raft River, which they hope to flood with aquifer recharge water from a planned pipeline. The group of nine farmers proposing the pipeline also intends to use it to provide surface water as an alternative to groundwater, given that their Raft River Aquifer is in decline.

Idaho grower group proposes irrigation and recharge pipeline

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

RAFT RIVER, Idaho — Nine irrigators who draw from the declining Raft River aquifer have proposed building an 11-mile pipeline, planning to switch fields to surface water when it's available for lease and to conduct managed aquifer recharge during the off-season.

The groundwater area, called Basin 43, stretches from Idaho's border with Utah north to the Snake River Plain. Though the basin's irrigators haven't been included in the recent Surface Water Coalition call against junior Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer well users, the Idaho Department of Water Resources has warned they'll also have to make future changes to make their operations more sustainable.

The project would cost \$15 million to \$18 million, and the farmers — who represent 30,000 irrigated acres — hope at least half of the project's cost will be covered by grants. They're in the process of applying for assistance from IDWR and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Participant John Spratling believes the project would boost the local economy by keeping farm acres in production.

"That's exactly why we want to do this, so we can keep farming," Spratling said. "I've got grandsons and two boys who want to farm, and that's what I did all my life."

If the pipeline were to run at capacity throughout the entire irrigation season, an engineering study the growers commissioned estimates they could supplant 25,000 acre-feet of groundwater with surface water, known as a soft conversion. In a best-case scenario, the pipeline would enable them to inject another 19,000 to 20,000 acre-feet into the aquifer through winter recharge.

"We have been talking about it for a lot of years, and just recently, it's started to look like something that could actually happen," said Todd Webb, a participant who serves on the board of the Raft River Groundwater District. "It's a very costly project to those involved, but ultimately, our goal is to maintain our livelihoods in that valley for a lot of years to come."

The pipeline would divert water from the Snake River at the east end of Minidoka Reservoir and continue south along the channel of the Raft River, most of which has run dry in recent years. Recharge water would flood the river plain where the pipeline dead-ends

and flow north in the river channel, filling nine planned recharge ponds covering 277 combined acres along the way.

Project participant Kendall Jones said flooding the valley would restore riparian habitat, potentially bringing pheasants back to the area. He's met with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game to discuss the ecological benefits. Growers have also sought help from Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, and Idaho House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley.

Participant Todd Garrett said leasing surface water would add at least \$20 per acre to his costs, but the engineering study confirms the combination of recharge and soft conversion would more than offset the aquifer's declines. Garrett said the group is applying for a private recharge water right and could also recharge water from a state water right.

IDWR's recharge coordinator Wesley Hipke, said recharge water would be available for the project in about half of years, given that a hydro-power project downstream on Milner Dam would have priority during the off-season.

"If we can assist them, it's something the (Idaho Water Board) is definitely very interested in doing," Hipke said.

U.S. House members urge union, ports to cooperate

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

Nine members of Congress, led by Washington Reps. Dan Newhouse and Dave Reichert, are urging the International Longshore and Warehouse Union and the Pacific Maritime Association to find ways to prevent port disruptions.

A work slowdown crippled container exports in 2014 and 2015.

At a conference in Long Beach, Calif., at the end of February, the presidents of ILWU and PMA said they are willing to raise the possibility of extending the agreement reached in 2015 beyond its July 1, 2019, expiration.

In light of that, Newhouse and Reichert, both Republicans, authored a letter to ILWU and PMA encouraging them to discuss options to preclude disruptions.

"Because workers, farmers and businesses rely on the efficient movement of goods, we place great importance on the normal and functional operation of our ports," the letter states.

The 2014-2015 slowdown cost farmers, manufacturers and retailers across the West hundreds of millions of dollars in losses because they could not get their goods to market, the letter states. Foreign market shares were lost, hurting businesses, ports, workers and shippers.



AP Photo/Elaine Thompson File

The Port of Seattle is shown in this file photo. Members of the U.S. House have written a letter to port managers and the union urging them to cooperate to avoid future work stoppages or slowdowns.

The letter was signed by Newhouse, Reichert and Reps. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash.; Kurt Schrader, D-Ore.; Mike Simpson, R-Idaho; Mike Coffman, R-Colo.; Doug LaMalfa, R-Calif.; Devin Nunes, R-Calif.; and Amata Radewagen, R-American Samoa.

"An extension of the agreement would restore confidence in port reliability and some market share lost to foreign competitors," said Will Boyington, a Newhouse spokesman.

The letter encourages the ILWU and PMA and puts them on notice that there is congressional scrutiny, he said.

Last year, a Newhouse-Schrader amendment was included in the Port Performance Program that was part of a transportation bill, the FAST Act, HR 22, that passed the House and Senate

and was signed into law by President Barack Obama.

The program requires the reporting of port statistics by the Bureau of Transportation Statistics to serve as a baseline in determining the economic impacts of port slowdowns.

Newhouse and Schrader last year also introduced HR 3932, the ECONOMICS Act. It would establish economic triggers that would require a board of inquiry to recommend to the president if injunctions should be sought to end strikes or slowdowns.

Newhouse and Reichert also introduced HR 3398, the PORTS Act, last year allowing governors of seaport states and territories to initiate boards of inquiry under the Taft-Hartley Act in the event of work slowdowns or strikes.

Both of those bills have been referred to committees and member support is being built, Boyington said.

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