

Potato truck may roll indefinitely

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

EAGLE, Idaho — Basketball star Kobe Bryant had the Great Big Idaho Potato Truck on his mind during one of the final games of his storied career, a sign to the Idaho Potato Commission that their traveling promotion hasn't lost its effectiveness after four years.

The Los Angeles Lakers guard, who recently retired, also referenced the running storyline of IPC commercials — featuring “actual” Idaho potato grower Mark Coombs' search for the “missing” potato truck.

“How long have you been working with Idaho potatoes?” Bryant asked ESPN sideline reporter Heather Cox, an IPC partner nicknamed “Spud” by professional athletes, prior to an interview. “Have they found that truck yet?”

Alabama coach Nick Saban asked Cox about the whereabouts of the 6-ton replica Russet Burbank on a flat-bed prior to the 2016 college football championship game, jokingly adding, “Is it real?”

With the truck recently departing for its fifth national tour to raise awareness about Idaho's most famous vegetable, IPC President and CEO Frank Muir believes the celebrity comments, which Cox relayed to him April 19, demonstrate why it must continue to roll indefinitely. Though IPC had mulled retiring the truck after its current trek, Muir said



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Children play a bean toss game to win Spuddy Buddy toys by the Great Big Idaho Potato Truck at the McDonald's restaurant in Chubbuck, Idaho, in this file photo from Oct. 3, 2015. The truck recently departed on its fifth national tour, and IPC has no immediate plans to retire it.

the organization is now leaning toward keeping it on the road for as long as the public remains eager to see it.

“The feedback we're getting from growers is, ‘Why would you take it off the road?’” Muir said. “We continue to have more requests for (truck appearances) than we can fulfill. They're begging to see it. How many people beg to see commercials?”

Idaho Falls grower and IPC Commissioner James Hoff agrees the truck remains an effective tool for the state's potato growers and takes the continued requests for truck appearances as a sign that it

hasn't overstayed its welcome.

“I haven't heard any naysayers about the truck out there,” Hoff said.

IPC has budgeted \$700,000 for the current tour, scheduled to cover about 25,000 miles. The organization has already filmed a new commercial updating the search for the truck. It is scheduled to debut during the national broadcast of Boise State University's first home game against Washington State University. Muir said the commercial ends with a “cliff hanger,” leaving the door open for the truck to remain at large.

During the last tour, Muir said the truck made eight ap-

pearances before crowds of more than 350,000, and one Florida family reported traveling five hours to see it.

“This is like seeing an eclipse. It only comes around once in a while, and people are excited to say they've seen it,” Muir said.

Some highlights of the current tour will include stops at the Kentucky Derby, a Kansas City rock festival, a New England chili cook-off, the premier of Idaho the Musical in Las Vegas, SeaFair in Seattle and a photo opportunity in which the truck will float on a barge through New York Harbor.

Unprotected junior Idaho well users face curtailment

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BOISE — During a decent water year, several Idaho irrigation wells will nonetheless likely be curtailed this summer, according to officials with the Idaho Department of Water Resources.

At risk are Eastern Snake Plain irrigators with junior groundwater rights dating to 1989 who haven't signed on to a mitigation plan for safe harbor from the Surface Water Coalition's delivery call, explained IDWR Deputy Director Mat Weaver.

In the past, Idaho Ground Water Appropriators, Inc., has provided mitigation for all junior groundwater users affected by the call. Going forward, IGWA will mitigate only for participants in a settlement it reached with the coalition last summer, leaving certain cities and well users who aren't affiliated with a groundwater district unprotected.

IGWA attorney T.J. Budge said unprotected irrigators may still join with their nearest groundwater district and enjoy IGWA's safe harbor, provided that they participate in the settlement. Budge said there will be no “free rides” for irrigators who aren't affected this summer but wait to join IGWA until a future year when their priority dates would be curtailed.

“We've been getting (new members) and we will be getting more, I'm sure,” Budge said. “There are still several out there.”

A&B Irrigation District and the Southwest and Goose Creek irrigation districts have gotten their own mitigation plans approved and several Idaho cities have a mitigation plan pending covering municipal use.

The coalition filed its call more than a decade ago, arguing well irrigation has contributed to declines in springs that supplement surface flows in Snake River reaches between Blackfoot and Milner Dam.

Though mountain snowpack is about average and reservoirs are relatively full in most of the state, IDWR has calculated that groundwater users still owe the coalition 44,200 acre-feet this season, accounting for the cumulative impacts of decades of well use on spring flows.

Budge explained the department began considering aquifer discharges in its injury formula last year, which increased IGWA's burden and was a chief motivator behind the settlement.

Weaver said IDWR is evaluating which users aren't covered by the three mitigation plans and believes more than 100 rights could be subject to curtailment. Those users have until May 3 to submit reasons to the department why their wells should remain active, though Weaver suspects it would take a few more weeks beyond the deadline to complete the analysis to move forward with curtailment. He said precedent for curtailment was set in 2009 when a few wells were shut down as a result of a trout farm's call.

Under the settlement, IGWA must give the coalition a flat 50,000 acre-feet of water per year, plus members must reduce annual groundwater consumption by 240,000 combined acre-feet, or roughly 12 percent per user. IGWA had applied to use its settlement as its new mitigation plan, but the cities of Idaho Falls and Pocatello filed objections, concerned they could be accountable for aquifer recovery milestones in the agreement.

Budge said the cities and IGWA resolved their differences during an April 18 meeting.

An amended version of the 2010 methodology order governing the call was reinstated on April 19 to cover the interim, and will remain in place for unaffiliated groundwater users. Budge said IGWA will abide by the agreement, even though it exceeds the current-year mitigation requirement.

Energy bill amendment to enable Klamath Basin water, power plans

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

KLAMATH FALLS, Ore. — Proponents of certain water solutions in the Klamath Basin say an energy bill amendment that passed the U.S. Senate provides key support for improving facilities and other initiatives.

The amendment by Oregon Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden, both Democrats, authorizes measures first proposed as part of the 2010 Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement, although it doesn't address the controversial removal of four dams on the Klamath River.

The provision allows the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to help farmers in the basin deal with reduced water supplies as a result of future water-sharing agreements and to provide reduced-cost power for irrigation, the senators said in a news release.

The provision, which also enables the bureau to do certain upgrades of irrigation facilities, was part of an energy bill that passed the Senate, 85-12, on April 20 and now heads to a Senate-House conference committee.

“It's really good news,” said Beatty, Ore., cattle rancher Becky Hyde, who represents the Upper Klamath



Becky Hyde

Users and is a longtime proponent of the KBRA. “The nice thing is, we're slowly ... starting to put regulatory assurances for species back into place for agriculture. This facilities bill resurrects some of the power stuff (in the KBRA).”

“We still have a long way to go on water balance, but we've got some good things happening,” she said.

As is often the case in the Klamath Basin, the measure is not without controversy. Lawrence Kogan, an attorney for the Klamath Irrigation District, and representatives of U.S. Rep. Doug LaMalfa, R-Calif., were meeting with Reclamation officials on April 21 to discuss the objections of basin irrigators to some of the plans.

Kogan said the bureau is using coercive tactics to pressure the KID to accept terms of a government loan to replace a nearly 100-year-old flume on one of its main canals by linking future water deliveries to the district's acceptance of the contract.

“It's a poison-pill bill that will kill the basin because Congress doesn't even know what it's put in the bill,” Ko-

gan said. He accuses proponents of “deception,” arguing their true aim is to turn much of the basin into non-productive wildlands.

But the senators insist that their amendment, along with other parts of the newly resurrected Klamath Basin plan, will benefit agriculture as well as fish and wildlife. The aim is to bring down power costs for basin irrigators, whose electricity costs are higher than those in similar Reclamation projects, officials say.

The plan will “help ensure that Klamath agriculture is a sustainable foundation of the local economy,” Merkley said in a press release.

It's been a decade since the expiration of a 50-year contract between the U.S. Department of the Interior and PacifiCorp caused power rates in the region to skyrocket from a half-cent per kilowatt-hour to as much as 10 cents, Hyde said. The lower rates were a trade-off for the ability to pump water through the project for its Klamath River hydroelectric facilities.

While the bill doesn't identify a funding amount, it enables the bureau to find lower-cost power for irrigators with projects that promote energy efficiency and renewable energy, the senators said. One

solution could be putting in micro hydro facilities along irrigation canals or the river, Hyde said.

“Micro hydro is a really interesting concept,” she said. “One of the things (the bill) asks for is to study in a really expedited way what's the best return for dollars invested in energy infrastructure upgrades, so that means solar could play a role or micro hydro could play a role.”

The bill's passage in the Senate comes two weeks after top state and federal officials gathered in Klamath, Calif., on April 6 to sign the final version of a dam-removal plan they announced in February. The plan calls for a nonprofit organization to take control of the four dams from owner PacifiCorp and seek a go-ahead for their removal from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

In addition, the parties signaled a plan to revive the KBRA, a companion to the original Klamath Hydroelectric Settlement Agreement, with federal legislation that would provide money to operate two diversion dams within the basin that PacifiCorp would turn over to Reclamation so irrigators wouldn't have to pick up the cost, Craig Tucker of the Karuk Tribe has said.

Blueberry farmer warns some surfactants may sunburn plants in unseasonably hot weather

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

Veteran blueberry grower Bob Mattila, who farms between Camas and Battle-ground, Wash., said a surfactant used with pesticides may cause sunburn when used in unseasonably hot weather.

Mattila said he lost 5 to 10 percent of his crop and wants to warn other farmers.

However, a berry crops extension agent at Oregon State University's North Willamette Research and Extension Center said it's too early to know if the damage will affect pollination. Associate Professor Wei Qian Yang said the damage was largely to flower petals. In some cases, only one-third to one-half of the petals were damaged, and flowers might be OK.

Wei said it would be wise to avoid spraying when unusually warm weather is anticipated. He suggested farmers read the surfactant label and look for high temperature warnings. He had not seen the product label in this case and did not know what it says.

Mattila said there is no temperature warning on the surfactant label. A surfactant, mixed with pesticide, helps the pesticide spread and stick to the plant, so it won't be washed off in rain.

While some flowers had patches of damage, others were “completely wiped out,” he said.

Mattila said he sprayed pesticides April 1 and 2, and the temperature reached 88 degrees on April 7. The National Weather Service in Portland said it was the hottest April 7 on record, with a high of 85 degrees at the Portland International Airport.

Alarmed by burned plants he saw afterward, Mattila said he sought advice from Wei at OSU's North Willamette station. He said Wei immediately suspected an oil-based surfactant might be responsible because another grower had the same problem. Wei confirmed that account.

Mattila said he also questioned the product distributor and was told the surfactant he used is polymer-based, not oil-based. A company representative was not immediately available to comment.

At any rate, Mattila said he's trying to figure it out but wants to warn other farmers. He said he's used the surfactant for years and never had trouble before, but noted that he hasn't seen 88 degrees in early April before, either.

“I wanted to put the information out there so farmers are aware of this,” he said.

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