



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

A linear irrigation system operates in a corn field in Oregon's Willamette Valley. State water regulators want to increase water right transaction fees by 15.88 percent over four years, the third hike since 2009.

Water regulators propose third transaction fee hike

Bill would increase fee rates by 15.88 percent over next four years

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Oregon water regulators want to raise fees for water right transactions by nearly 16 percent over four years to avoid processing slowdowns for irrigators.

The Oregon Water Resource Department's request to state lawmakers, House Bill 2295, would mark the third such increase since 2009.

Some groups representing irrigators are uneasy about the proposal, particularly in light of another bill that would impose a new \$100 management fee on every water right in Oregon.

Under HB 2295, a transaction fee increase of 15.88 percent would be phased in over four years and a sunset on previous hikes — set to expire this year — would be eliminated.

If the fee schedule were to revert back to 2009 levels, OWRD would have to cut 5.5 full-time positions, effectively extending the time that irrigators must wait to develop or transfer water rights, said Tom Byler, the agency's director.

The increase is also necessary to maintain OWRD's dam inspection program, which oversees roughly 900 large structures, he said. "These are all very important functions for the agency."

Fees must be raised just to keep these services at current levels due to climbing expenses for salaries, benefits and retirement plans for state employees, Byler said at a Feb. 13 hearing of the House Committee on Energy and the Environment.

The Oregon Water Resources Congress, an irrigator group, wishes that fee increases wouldn't occur so frequently but nonetheless supports HB 2295, said April Snell, its executive director.

The Oregon Association of Nurseries also testified in favor of the bill.

"Water transfers are a big part of how we do business," said Jeff Stone, executive director of OAN. Nurseries typically rely on water right transfers when they expand production onto newly bought or leased property.

Water for Life, an irrigator group, is concerned about the rate at which costs are growing, said Richard Kosesan, its lobbyist. "Water for Life is not enamored with the fee increases."

The Oregon Farm Bureau is neutral regarding HB 2295 and won't oppose the hike as long as another piece of legislation — House Bill 2706, which imposes the

\$100 management fee on water rights — isn't passed, said Mary Anne Nash, public policy counsel for the group.

The cost of processing water right transactions is currently split evenly

between water users and OWRD.

The Farm Bureau wants the agency to continue shouldering half the expense instead of shifting more of the burden on irrigators, Nash said.

Wolf count, management plan update delayed

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

Oregon's heavy snow in January caused problems for wildlife staff who track the state's wolf population.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife said extreme weather in northeast Oregon, where most of the state's wolves live, interrupted airplane, helicopter and ground surveys of wolfpacks. As a result, the annual wolf report has been delayed a month and won't be delivered to the ODFW Commission until its April 21 meeting in Klamath Falls.

The report usually is released in March and typically includes an updated wolf population count and information on the number of breeding pairs in the state. The count provides an information baseline as the commission considers updates to the state's Wolf Management and Conservation plan. The plan is reviewed every five years, and the commission will most likely adopt an updated version later in 2017.

Although heavy snow and an extended cold snap delayed



Courtesy of ODFW

Adult wolves from the Walla Walla Pack were caught on a remote trail camera last year in Umatilla County, Ore. Extreme weather in northeast Oregon interrupted wolfpack surveys.

ODFW's field work, department spokeswoman Michelle Dennehy said it probably didn't harm Oregon's wolves.

"Wolves typically do quite well during the winter," she said by email. "Winters that are hard on deer and elk may actually be easier on wolves. There is winter (prey) loss to scavenge and it is harder for ungulates (deer and elk) to escape in the deep snow."

Oregon had a minimum of 110 wolves at the end of 2015, according to figures released by ODFW in February 2016. At least seven wolves died in 2016. Four members of Wallowa County's Imnaha pack, including venerable al-

pha male OR-4, were shot by ODFW in March 2016 after repeatedly attacking, killing and eating livestock. Wildlife biologists speculated at the time that the group began attacking livestock due to OR-4's advanced age and the fact that his longtime mate limped from an injured leg. They had two yearlings with them, and the four appeared to have separated from or been forced out of the main Imnaha pack.

In addition, a female wolf designated OR-28 was found dead in October 2016 in south-central Oregon. Officials have not said how the wolf died, and Oregon State Police are investigating. A \$20,000 reward for information is available.

State police also are investigating a wolf found dead in northeast Oregon in March 2016.

In May 2016, a sheep herder shot a wolf from the Walla Walla pack that was attacking sheep. State police judged the shooting was lawful under the "caught in the act" provision that allows producers to kill wolves that are wounding, biting, killing or chasing livestock, according to ODFW.

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