

Oregon

Pendleton native to lead reborn Water Coalition

Group to focus on education, outreach

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
EO Media Group

PENDLETON, Ore. — Marika Sitz knew she wanted to return to Eastern Oregon. Her timing couldn't be better.

After graduating from Pendleton High School in 2011, Sitz moved to the Silicon Valley, where she earned her bachelor's degree in human biology from Stanford University. Her focus was predominantly on food and agricultural systems, which led to an interest in water development and sustainability.

Now, as local farmers find themselves on the cusp of obtaining new irrigation supplies that could mean hundreds of millions of dollars for the basin, Sitz has come home to revive the dormant Oregon Water Coalition, a nonprofit group formed 25 years ago to promote water resources.

Sitz, 24, was officially hired in January as coordinator for the coalition. She will serve at the recommendation of an eight-member board of directors, including long-time irrigators and irrigation district managers.

"It's nice to be able to come back to a small town like this and have an opportunity like this," Sitz said.

Sitz is a former PHS athlete and Lantern Cup winner, the school's highest award for personal and classroom achievement. Her family comes from a cattle ranching background and she said rural issues have always informed her way of thinking — even after college in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Sitz graduated from Stanford in 2015, and followed that up with a one-year fellowship with the Bill Lane Center for the American West. It was there she became involved in a program called Water in the West,



E.J. Harris/EO Media Group
Marika Sitz has returned to Eastern Oregon to revive the Oregon Water Coalition and will be helping promote water resources and coordinated education and outreach.

researching solutions to the region's intensifying water shortage.

From there, Sitz said she began looking at opportunities in Oregon

and came across the Northeast Oregon Water Association, or NOWA. That's the group working to negotiate new mitigated water rights for

Umatilla and Morrow county farmers from the Columbia River, a delicate and lengthy effort with potentially huge economic rewards.

Sitz reached out to J.R. Cook, executive director of NOWA and a board member for the Oregon Water Coalition. Cook said he felt Sitz would be a great fit for the water coalition, which formed in 1992 to educate and do outreach, but had largely become inactive and nearly dissolved last year.

"(Sitz) lit a fire under us," Cook said.

With Sitz on board, Cook said the coalition has been reborn. And though Sitz said she is still learning the ropes, she is already at work rebuilding their website and re-establishing their community partnerships.

"It's a little bit about finding our place," she said.

Ray Kopacz, coalition vice president and manager of the Stanfield Irrigation District, said it will take some time to get themselves organized after years of sitting in limbo.

"It never really died. We just lost some key people who were helping run it," Kopacz said.

Sitz plans to stay with the coalition for two years before applying to law school. She said the relationships she builds now will be invaluable down the road.

"Water is not going to become any less important in the future," she said. "It's just key to the economic engine of so many areas."

When Sitz leaves, Cook said they hope to continue recruiting new blood to carry on the work that's already been done. It has taken 30 years of work to get to where they are now, he said, and it will be up to the new guard to see many of these projects to fruition.

"The goal is to bring people Marika's age back our way to work for northeast Oregon," Cook said.

Lawmakers consider on-farm treatment of sewage sludge

Bill would clarify land use law to allow mobile biosolid processing in farm zones

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

SALEM — Sewage sludge already serves as fertilizer on Oregon farms but a proposed bill would also permit processing the waste within farm zones.

It's common for biosolids, also called human manure, to be treated at wastewater plants and then applied to fields that aren't producing crops meant for human consumption.

Wayne Buma, who operates AAA Advanced Septic Cleaning in Southern Or-



Capital Press File

Oregon legislators are considering a bill that would clarify land use laws to allow mobile biosolid processing in farm zones.

egon, wanted to use waste from septic tanks in the same way but ran into troubles with Jackson County's government.

The county's objection wasn't based on sanitary issues, but rather Oregon's land

use laws: It wasn't clear that sewage treatment is allowed on land zoned for "exclusive farm use."

"There is nothing new going on as far as the safety. All that has been approved," Buma told mem-

bers of the House Agriculture Committee at a March 2 hearing.

Under House Bill 2179, the statute would clarify that on-farm biosolids treatment is allowed in farm zones as long as it's conducted with mobile units.

If on-farm biosolid treatment isn't allowed, Buma said he'd have to separately process the waste at the location of each septic tank, rather than collectively treat the material in a large tank at the site of application.

"Right now, it's bottle-necked," he said.

The treatment process described by Buma, which is permitted by Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality, is fairly straightforward.

Biosolids are filtered to remove plastic and other debris, then agricultural lime is mixed with the waste to make

it alkaline and kill pathogens. The sterilized biosolids are then spread across a field with a truck.

"It's a stable product, it's not a haz-mat material," Buma said of the lime that's integral to the process.

Legislators seemed amenable to HB 2179, with the committee's chairman, Brian Clem, D-Salem, testifying in favor of the bill as a "no-brainer."

While Oregon's land use laws generally confine processing activities within "urban growth boundaries," that often involves increasing the "truck miles" required to transport materials, Clem said.

In this case, there is no construction of a permanent facility that would take farmland out of production, he said.

"If it's not displacing farmland, I think it's good to have processing as close to the source of the material as possible," Clem said.

Lawmakers back away from controversial farm property tax bill

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

SALEM — Intense opposition from Oregon's farmers, ranchers and forestland owners has apparently convinced lawmakers to back away from altering key property tax provisions affecting agriculture and forestry.

Machinery used for agriculture and forestry is exempt from property tax assessments while property dedicated to producing crops, livestock and timber is less heavily taxed than other real estate.

Under the original language of House Bill 2859, the property tax exemption for equipment and the farm use assessment for land would expire in 2024 unless renewed by lawmakers.

The proposal evoked alarm in Oregon's natural resource community, which turned out in full force at a March 1 hearing to argue that creating a "sunset" for these provisions would financially destabilize farming, ranching and forestry.

By the end of the hearing, the overwhelmingly negative testimony against HB 2859 seemed to have the desired effect on members of the House Revenue Committee.

"I'm pretty convinced putting a sunset on these things that are very long-term assets doesn't make any sense," said committee Chairman Phil Barnhart, D-Eugene.

At the beginning of the hearing, Barnhart said the bill was drafted in response to an audit from Oregon's Secretary of State's Office, which called for periodic review of existing property tax exemptions and tax credits.

In light of the objections to HB 2859, though, Barnhart said he thought the sunset provisions related to natural resources should be eliminated from the bill.

The suggestion drew no objections from other committee members, so Barnhart said they would only consider the remaining provisions of HB 2859 related to economic development and other issues.

"I think you should consider all of what I just said means that you win," Barnhart told the audience, to enthusiastic applause.

Farmers, ranchers and forestland owners at the hearing emphasized that natural resource industries were already highly uncertain due to the weather and volatile markets.

Landowners said they shouldn't also have to contend with the possibility their property taxes may rise dramatically every six years, which is the period of sunset review established under HB 2859.

"In the orchard business, we need to plan long-term," said Bruce Chapin, a hazelnut producer near Keizer, Ore.

Marsha Carr, a forestland owner near Monroe, Ore., said her annual property taxes would increase from about \$1,000 to more than \$25,000 under HB 2859.

Carr said her family harvests timber in small patches of five to seven acres, which preserves habitat for wildlife and songbirds.

"That would have to change to pay the taxes," she said. "We would have to cut larger areas."

Farmers rely on specialized equipment but they often operate it for only a month or less per year, unlike other industries where machinery creates revenues year-round, said Roger Beyer, a lobbyist for the Western Equipment Dealers Association and several crop organizations.

If property taxes were imposed on farm machinery, it would destroy demand for machinery, he said. "It would simply dry up and go away."

Landowners also testified that property would unfairly be taxed at the maximum assessed value if the farm use assessment was allowed to expire.



IDAHO POWER®
An IDACORP Company

Be Safe Around Power Lines

LOOK UP



idahopower.com/safety



10-4/#17