

Oregon

Old PGG terminals, elevators to get upgrades



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

A sugar beet field in Eastern Oregon is irrigated in June. Supporters say two bills under consideration by the Oregon Legislature will help prevent urban encroachment from damaging irrigation facilities and water supplies.

Irrigators butt heads with cities over water legislation

Bill would impose new notification and discharge permission requirements

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Irrigation districts are butting heads with city governments in Oregon over proposed legislation that's intended to avert conflicts over housing development and stormwater discharge.

Supporters of Senate bills 865 and 866 say the two bills will help prevent urban encroachment from damaging irrigation facilities and water supplies.

"We need this tool so we can avoid fights," said Marc Thalacker, manager of the Three Sisters Irrigation District, during a March 9 legislative hearing.

Cities and counties would have to provide notice about impending property subdivisions to irrigation districts, drainage districts and similar entities under SB 865.

Districts shouldn't be surprised by new developments, said Brent Stevenson, manager of the Santiam Water Control District.

"It will only save money in the long run for others," Stevenson said of SB 865.

When farmland is converted to urban uses, unintended consequences to irrigation systems can arise, said April Snell, executive director of the Oregon Water Resources Congress.

Cities and counties can ward off such problems by getting input from irrigation districts before approving a plat, or map of the new parcels, she said.

"It's really for the ability of districts to provide the information," Snell said.

Irrigation districts can encounter serious financial impacts from urban encroachment, while disruptions to water infrastructure can also hurt urban residents, said Mark Landauer, lobbyist for the Special Districts Association of Oregon.

"People tend not to be very happy when their basements get flooded or things of that nature," he said.

Under SB 866, cities would have to take reasonable steps to ensure stormwater discharged into irrigation canals meets federal and state water quality standards.

Cities would also be held liable for discharging stormwater into canals unless they receive permission from an irrigation district or implement plans to avoid affecting the district.

Proponents of SB 866 say that irrigation districts may not have the facilities to handle additional water from municipal runoff, which could potentially breach canals and cause flooding.

Farmers are also under increasing scrutiny regarding food safety and environmental impacts, so they can face liabilities from pollutants found in stormwater, supporters say.

The League of Oregon Cities and several municipal governments oppose both of the bills, arguing they give excessive authority to irrigation districts while imposing unrealistic conditions on cities.

Opponents claim SB 865 is unnecessarily duplicative of

Projects to be completed before next harvest

By GEORGE PLAVERN
EO Media Group

When United Grain Corp. stepped in for Pendleton Grain Growers last year, purchasing all of the co-op's old grain infrastructure, the company promised to invest \$9 million toward making the facilities more modern and efficient.

Those upgrades are now underway. Among other things, United Grain plans to add two new ground piles near Mission and Helix, and has already installed automated kiosks at the McNary river terminal to help trucks weigh and unload cargo faster.

Jason Middleton, region manager for United Grain, said they are also working to buy 20 more acres from the Port of Umatilla to expand at McNary along the Columbia River, boosting storage capacity by 3 million to 4 million bushels. As for upcountry elevators, Middleton said they will provide space for specialty crops other than wheat, such as beans, canola and barley.

The projects were laid out during a series of grower meetings last week in Pendleton, Hermiston and La Grande, giving local farmers an idea of what to expect come next harvest.

"Speed, space and service is what our goals are here," Middleton said. "We're trying to repair our infrastructure, and keep up with the grower."

For 86 years, members relied on PGG for fuel, agronomy, marketing and more. After the co-op dissolved on May 2, 2016, the board of directors



E.J. Harris/EO Media Group

Wheat flows into a grate as operator Pete Veliz opens the bottom of a grain hopper at the United Grain McNary terminal on Monday in Umatilla, Ore.

voted to sell its grain assets to United Grain, including the McNary terminal, Alicel rail terminal and upcountry elevators.

United Grain took over the business on June 10, just weeks before wheat harvest began. That didn't allow much time to focus on improving buildings, though Middleton, who was hired by PGG as the director of grain operations in 2012, said they knew coming in there was work that needed to be done.

"There was just a lack of maintenance on a lot of those projects," said Middleton. "You can go back four decades, at least."

With that hectic first harvest behind them, Middleton said they are now ready to move forward on infrastructure. The bulk of the money will be spent at McNary, he said, where they recently automated kiosks at the trucking scales.

Now, drivers simply swipe a card to bring up their information, and are directed to one of five pits where they can unload grain.

The way scales are set up will allow trucks to flow in one

direction, Middleton said, instead of before, when drivers had to weigh in and out at the same scale.

"It's going to save a lot of time compared to last year," he said. "There's no reason trucks couldn't get in and out anywhere from five to eight minutes, entire process."

Automation has also come to the elevator control room at McNary, which will make it easier for the operators there to switch between bins and keep wheat segregated. The idea, Middleton said, is to maximize efficiency — the less time farmers spend at the elevator, the more time they have to work in the fields.

That's also the concept behind ground piles at Mission and Helix. As combines are able to cut wheat faster, Middleton said farmers are using larger trucks to deliver grain, which can be unloaded more quickly at piles as opposed to the old upcountry elevators.

Each pile will store 1.4 million bushels, Middleton said. The goal is to build a third pile near Athena by next year as well, he added.

Finally, a ground pile and automated scales will be installed at the Alicel Terminal near La Grande. Both Alicel and McNary are used for storing and shipping grain, which is hauled by train at Alicel and by river barge at McNary.

"It should just be a lot more of an efficient process," he said.

As for the upcountry elevators, many of the old wooden buildings have already been closed for safety reasons, Middleton said. Those include Helix, Rew, Mission, Stanton, Elgin, and Holdman.

But some of the metal and concrete elevators will be upgraded, where farmers will be able to store crops on demand separate from traditional wheat. With wheat prices as low as they are, Middleton said he expects farmers may be considering alternatives to help pay the bills.

Options are limited in dryland farming, but barley, canola and certain types of beans or peas may be grown, depending on the market.

"If there are other options out there, I think guys will be looking at them," he said.

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