

Washington

Little Goose navigation lock repairs delayed another week

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Reopening of the navigation lock at Little Goose Dam has been pushed back for an additional week.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers evaluated remaining lock work under contract at the Snake River dam, located near Starbuck, Wash. The corps is making critical repairs, routine maintenance and other improvements during an extended lock closure on the Snake and Columbia river system, originally slated to last 14 weeks, from Dec. 12 through March 20.

All other locks in the system were set to reopen March 20 as previously scheduled, according to the corps.

The corps decided the best course of action to reduce risk and bring the lock back to operational capability was to award a new contract for the completion of the remaining work, according to the corps website.

The corps awarded the new contract March 10 to Knight Construction & Supply Inc., of Deer Park, Wash. The new contractor reassessed the navigation lock's maintenance and repair status and estimated the remaining work required to return the lock to service will delay reopening the lock until 11:59 p.m. April 2.

The corps previously announced reopening of the Little Goose lock, originally slated for March 20, would be delayed by at least a week due to weather, on-site efficiency and unforeseen crack repair requirements on the south navigation lock gate.

"As long they get it right," said Randy Olstad, general manager of Columbia Grain in Clarkston, Wash.

Olstad had hoped to be shipping grain by March 27, but he said a delay of an additional week won't hinder business too much.

"A week – no one likes it, but we'll deal with it," he said.

Any longer than that, Olstad said, and his company would have to make some adjustments. It would also affect expectations for wheat getting to market, he said.

Olstad praised the corps for keeping industry members informed of the process.

"They have a big job ahead of them, they saw some unforeseen things coming," he said. "I wish they would have seen it earlier, but you can't cry over spilled milk. We just need to get it done, get it done right and get on with our business."

Cause of Edwall grain elevator collapse unknown

Electricity, industry track affected

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

EDWALL, Wash. — The insurer for a Eastern Washington grain company is investigating why a grain elevator collapsed.

The collapse occurred about 1 a.m. March 15 in Edwall, Wash.

"We really don't know why," said Brian Gordon, CEO of Ritzville Warehouse Co. "We're just happy it happened when no one was around and no one got hurt."

Edwall fire personnel and utility authorities responded, said Lincoln County Sheriff Wade Magers.

Magers said the Lincoln County Sheriff's Office is



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

A crew works March 16 on a collapsed grain elevator at the Ritzville Warehouse Co. site in Edwall, Wash. The elevator held 170,000 to 175,000 bushels of wheat, CEO Brian Gordon said.

not investigating the collapse. He has no reason to suspect a person did something to the elevator, he told the Capital Press, saying the cause is likely to be a structural issue, such as metal fatigue, or caused by

weather.

Gordon doesn't yet have a total estimated cost of the damages.

The company has turned the matter over to its insurance company, which will

hire companies to salvage what they can, Gordon said. He expected cleanup to begin by March 20.

Gordon said farmer-members of the company are not impacted by the collapse. The company owns the wheat, he said.

The elevator held 170,000 to 175,000 bushels of wheat and was "basically full," Gordon said. Portland prices for wheat are \$4.75 to \$4.80 per bushel, he said.

Gordon hopes to rebuild the elevator, although the company doesn't have enough details yet to say for sure, he said.

Avista Utilities has shut off power to the site, said David Vowels, communications specialist for the company.

The towns of Edwall and Reardan may have experienced a flickering of lights,

but nothing more extensive, Vowels said.

A railroad track was damaged by the collapse and will be repaired, said Gus Melonas, spokesman for the BNSF Railway. The mainline and siding were not affected and are in service. The railroad is determining ownership of the affected track.

Ritzville Warehouse has hired a security company to keep people from entering the site, Gordon said.

Magers said the security company is strictly to keep people from getting too close. A second grain bin is potentially compromised, he said.

"We want to make sure everybody's safe," he said. "Thank God that happened when it did, in the morning hours. If that would have been a different time, we could have had a tragedy."

WAFLA moves H-2A workers to PNW by air

By **DAN WHEAT**
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The farm labor association WAFLA has transported H-2A-visa foreign guestworkers from Mexico to the Pacific Northwest by air for the first time.

A group of 18 workers recruited by WAFLA flew from Durango to Tijuana, Mexico, on March 12 where they received their visas at the U.S. Consulate and spent the night. The next day they crossed the border on a charter bus and went to San Diego International Airport where they boarded a flight to Seattle. They flew to Boise and then were on a charter bus for 30 miles to reach a farm in Treasure Valley where they are working.



Courtesy of WAFLA

Eighteen farmworkers pose at Durango, Mexico airport on March 12, before boarding a flight to Tijuana. They received H-2A foreign guestworker visas there before flying to Seattle and then Boise to work at a Treasure Valley farm. They were the first H-2A workers flown to the Pacific Northwest by WAFLA instead of coming by bus.

cific Northwest," the association said in a statement.

Flights cut travel time from five days to two, are safer than buses, the cost is comparable and workers prefer it, the statement said.

The flights were a test run

for plans to transport up to 100 workers per day by air starting in May, said George Zanatta, WAFLA chief operating officer.

While the trip went well it's still being analyzed to determine how heavy to go forward

with flights, he said.

"The challenge is the size of the group and locations and coordinating everything. You may have 75 workers and buses for 52. We have to bus at the border and the arrival point," Zanatta said.

There are a lot of variables so it might make more sense to fly some groups from and to some locations more than others, he said.

"It's a learning curve. We save on food and lodging expenses of busing people the whole way but air will actually cost a little more. The savings is on time," he said.

WAFLA has an April 21 deadline for growers to place orders for workers for this year. Summer and fall harvests and harvest preparations are peak times.

WAFLA brought 10,527 workers from Mexico in 2016 and will have brought 3,000 in so far this year by the end of March, Dan Fazio, WAFLA director, has said.

He expects to reach 12,000 by year's end. Zanatta said much less than half will come by air.

The prospect of using airlines was talked about at WAFLA's Workforce Summit in Ellensburg, Jan. 26, where a representative of Volaris Airlines spoke.

Senate's 'use it or lose it' water bill heads to House

Lawmaker: Let's encourage conservation

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The House next week may take up a bill to ensure conservation doesn't erode agricultural water rights.

Senate Bill 5010 would allow irrigation districts and farmers to retain their full water rights, even if they cut back

on use for an extended period.

The bill's prime sponsor, Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Judy Warnick, said farmers should be encouraged to save water, without fear of having to relinquish a portion of their water rights.

"There's kind of a feeling, if you don't use it, you're going to lose it," she said during a hearing this session on the bill.

Under certain circumstances, the Department of Ecology can withdraw water rights that haven't been used for five

straight years.

The law cites nearly two dozen exceptions. For example, farmers who irrigate less because of drought, an abundance of rainfall or crop rotations aren't in danger of losing water rights.

SB 5010 would add conservation to the list. Washington Farm Bureau associate director of governmental relations Evan Sheffels said it leaves more water in streams by removing an incentive to occasionally plant water-intensive crops to keep a water right.

"It will result in better outcomes all around," he said.

Environmental groups and tribes don't embrace that argument. The Republican-led Senate passed the bill, though most Democrats voted no.

"Agriculture already has over 70 percent of the water rights. This would lead to hoarding of water," said Sen. John McCoy, D-Tulalip.

Mike Schwisow, a lobbyist for an association of irrigation districts, said conservation-minded irrigators don't want to lose water rights need-

ed in dry years or to expand acreage.

He said he didn't know of any irrigation district that has lost a water right for not using it, but he called Warnick's bill a "common-sense protection."

"The prudent way of doing business is to be protective of your water rights," he said.

Environmental groups and tribes say unused water rights should be temporarily or permanently placed in a state-run trust for other beneficial uses.

"The tribe is concerned that it's inefficient and wasteful to allow users to monopolize water rights when they're not actually needing them or using them," Muckleshoot Indian Tribe attorney Ann Tweedy told the Senate Agriculture Committee.

Sheffels said the trust is a good program, if a farmer can afford a good lawyer. "You don't want to do anything with your water right without a good counsel, and that costs money," he said.

The bill does not have the backing of Ecology. The department's water resources manager, Dave Christensen, said the current exceptions and the trust allow farmers to conserve water without losing water rights.

"Our central concern is that this bill would reduce water availability for new landowners," he said.

Christensen said that there are too many water rights for Ecology to monitor whether they are being fully used. The issue, however, can come up when a water-right holder seeks to change the place and purpose of the right.

"That's when that water-right holder might find out some of their water right is relinquished if they can't document they've been using it," he said.

SB 5010 has been referred to the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.



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