

# Irrigators criticize \$100 water rights fee proposal

### Proposal to require water measurement devices also draws objections

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

SALEM — A proposed \$100 annual fee on all Oregon water rights has met with criticism from irrigators who say it would contribute to already mounting financial burdens.

Farmers overwhelmingly testified against House Bill 2706, which aims to raise money for water management, during a March 22 hearing before the House Committee on Energy and Environment.

Members of the Klamath Water Users Association, for example, are already paying steep costs to comply with the Endangered Species Act and engage in water rights adjudication in the region, said Dave Jensen, a farmer and representative of the group.

“Would \$100 break a bunch

of farmers out there? Probably not, but there is always the straw that broke the camel’s back,” Jensen said.

For irrigators with multiple water rights, the bill would cap total fees at \$1,000 a year, while municipalities could pay up to \$2,500 a year.

The money raised would pay for the administrative, technical and field duties performed by the Oregon Water Resources Department, which oversees 89,000 water rights in the state.

The bill would effectively impose a discriminatory tax on irrigators and other water users, said Curtis Martin, a rancher and chairman of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association’s water resources committee.

“There is no additional service being delivered to the users of the resource,” Martin said.

Opponents also argue that electricity costs have continued rising, adding to the cost of pumping water, and irrigators would have to pay the management fee even if they didn’t fully use their water rights.

“When they shut you off, you still have to pay that bill,”



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

A linear irrigation system operates in a corn field in Oregon’s Willamette Valley. A bill under consideration in the legislature would impose an annual \$100 fee for each of Oregon’s nearly 89,000 water rights.

said Tom Mallams, a rancher and former Klamath County commissioner.

House Bill 2705, a companion proposal requiring the installation of water measurement devices at irrigation diversions, also drew objections from irrigators at the hearing.

Complying with the requirement would be expensive and the Oregon Water Resources Department doesn’t have enough staff to analyze the new information anyway,

said John O’Keeffe, president of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association.

“Additional data for the sake of data does not solve any problem,” O’Keeffe said.

It would be more realistic to ensure that watermasters — who can already order water measurements when necessary — are properly equipped to do their jobs, he said.

Installing water measurement devices also isn’t practical for farmers who rely on

flood irrigation and divert water directly from streams onto fields, according to opponents.

Some opponents also questioned the fairness and wisdom of exempting domestic well users from the bill.

“If you’re going to manage water, I don’t know how you’re going to do that without looking at private wells,” said Irene Gilbert of La Grande, Ore.

Water conservation groups argued that a new funding source is needed because OWRD’s cost of administering water rights is largely borne by state taxpayers.

The private interests who primarily benefit from the system, meanwhile, only pay a one-time application fee to establish water rights, said Kimberley Priestley, senior policy analyst with WaterWatch of Oregon.

“This is the public’s water. The public is currently paying through the general fund for the management of its water,” said Priestley.

An annual management fee has already been identified as a stable source of funding by the Oregon Water Resources

Commission, which oversees OWRD, she said.

As for measurement devices, the requirement is needed because “what gets measured gets managed,” Priestley said.

Proponents claim that only 20 percent of Oregon’s water rights holders currently measure and report their usage, since this is a requirement for irrigation districts, governments and those with rights issued since 1993.

Despite recognition by the Oregon Water Resources Commission as a key management tool, there has been limited progress in expanding water measurement, according to bill supporters.

“We can no longer afford to put our heads in the sand and pretend water management issues will just go away,” said Joe Furia, general counsel for the Freshwater Trust nonprofit.

The committee’s chairman, Ken Helm, D-Beaverton, said the bills were “conversation starters” and would likely change in response to input from a “broad stakeholder group” he’s convened, which includes agriculture and environmental groups.

# Being tapped state president a dream come true for Baker City FFA member

By MARINA RIKER  
For the Capital Press

REDMOND, Ore. — When 18-year-old Kourtney Lehman made the nearly five-hour trek from Baker City to Redmond for the 89th Oregon State FFA convention last week, she never imagined she would return as the organization’s state president.

“You always dream to get to this point, but it’s hard,” said Lehman. “It definitely feels like I’m in a different world right now.”

Lehman, a senior at Baker High School, was named president of the 2017-18 Oregon State FFA officer team on Monday, the final day of the convention held at the Deschutes County Fair and Expo Center over the weekend of March 24-27. More than 2,000 FFA members and hundreds of other attendees, judges and sponsors flocked to the event — along with a few horses, ducks and sheep.

During the weekend, thousands of students decked out in blue-and-gold corduroy participated in events ranging from debates on hot-button agricultural topics to marketing contests. Depending on how they fared, they were hand-picked by judges to lead the organization for the next year.

“My biggest goal is just serving the members,” said Lehman. “They’re all so passionate about making a difference in their communities.”

Just minutes after Lehman was named president, her so-



Courtesy of Lee Letsch, Oregon FFA

Oregon FFA’s new state officers take the gavel Monday at the organization’s state convention in Redmond. From left are President Kourtney Lehman, Vice President Emma Rooker, Secretary Jensen Kemble, Treasurer Wade Rynearson, Reporter Lee Wesenberg and Sentinel Gaby Santa Cruz.



Marina Riker/For the Capital Press

A sea of blue-and-gold corduroy jackets flocked to the Deschutes County Fair and Expo for the 89th Oregon State FFA Convention over the weekend of March 24-27. More than 2,000 FFA members attended the event, along with hundreds of judges, sponsors and other attendees.

cial media accounts exploded with congratulatory messages and blue-and-gold heart symbols. Even though she won the state job interview contest and

placed third place in a public speaking competition earlier in the weekend, she was shocked to learn she’d been named the state’s FFA leader.

“It’s been an amazing experience,” said Lehman, whose father, brother and sister were also FFA members.

Over the next year, officers such as Lehman will be responsible for holding events including educational workshops and leadership camps, as well as governing thousands of members statewide.

Emma Rooker of the Bend FFA Chapter was selected as state vice president, while Wade Rynearson of the Union FFA Chapter was named treasurer.

Lee Wesenberg of the Sutherlin FFA Chapter was chosen as state reporter and Gaby Santa Cruz of Hood River Valley High School is sentinel.



Courtesy of Kourtney Lehman  
Kourtney Lehman, the new Oregon FFA president.

After three long days of interviews with judges, Jensen Kemble of Ontario High School was picked for state secretary. Kemble, 17, said he was overwhelmed by the “whirlwind” that came before the announcement of the new officers — especially on Monday morning, when the judges’ votes were tallied.

“The process leading up to the announcement is very intense,” said Kemble. “It takes several minutes to calculate the votes and the entire time you just grab onto the other candidates for support and hope for the best.”

The convention’s theme was “Don’t Back Down,” a concept that was weaved into many of the weekend’s events ranging from debate challenges to marketing competitions.

On Sunday, Sevana Patrick, a senior from the Hermiston FFA Chapter, spent the entire morning preparing ma-

terials for the convention’s marketing competition finals.

The 18-year-old said her favorite part of participating in the organization is learning leadership skills and being supported by peers. After high school, she plans to enlist in the U.S. Navy, where she wants to further hone her skills as a leader and team member.

“It’s about being accepted and having that family, and having something that’s greater than yourself,” said Patrick, whose team placed third in the marketing competition.

The weekend was 18-year-old Sebastian Powers-Leach’s second time attending the FFA convention. The North Marion High School senior raises market sheep and wants to work in agriculture, but his favorite part of the FFA is competing in debate contests.

Powers-Leach and his peers were tasked with researching and debating agricultural issues that ranged from whether to label genetically modified foods to the perks of state farm-to-school food programs. Last year, the students debated immigration issues — a heated topic — in addition to less controversial ones such as whether to hold the convention at a single location each year, Powers-Leach said.

“A lot of it is opinion-based to an extent,” said Powers-Leach. “But there are others where you really need the facts to back it up with research.”

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