



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press  
Sam Sweeney has solar panels on his farm near Dayton, Ore., but is concerned about larger commercial solar projects being developed on high-value farmland.

## New hurdle proposed for solar projects on high-value farmland

### Bill would require alternatives analysis for solar projects

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

SALEM — Solar power facilities on high-value farmland in Oregon would have to clear a new hurdle under a bill being considered by state lawmakers.

Commercial developers would first have to demonstrate that alternative sites aren't available under House Bill 3050, a requirement that currently applies to solar facilities larger than 12 acres.

Proponents of the bill, including the Oregon Farm Bureau and the 1,000 Friends of Oregon conservation group, say the new test would discourage conversion of the state's most productive land.

An uptick in commercial solar power proposals in Oregon's Willamette Valley has raised concerns that clusters of developments will change the agricultural character of affected areas, supporters say.

Such close groupings of solar facilities effectively undermine the current 12-acre exemption to the alternative analysis, according to proponents.

The growing popularity of long-term leases of farmland for commercial solar projects has prompted the Oregon Board of Agriculture to ask for a review of land use regulations for such sites.

Supporters of HB 3050 say that solar developments drive up rent prices for farmland even while long-term leases for solar panels may permanently take land out of agriculture.

The Oregon Farm Bureau was alerted to the problem by "mass mailings" from solar companies to farmers, said Mary Anne Nash, public policy counsel for the group.

Developers should first look for other options before seeking to lease high-value farmland, she said.

Wind turbine projects are already subject to the alternatives analysis requirement, so it should also apply to commercial solar facilities, said Meriel Darzen of 1,000 Friends of Oregon.

Critics of the bill countered that the new requirement is overly broad and ignores existing rules that protect farmland.

## Assessment increase helps fund repairs to Owyhee Project

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — Owyhee Project patrons will pay \$4 an acre more this year for their irrigation water, with the additional money being used to make repairs on the aging system that provides water to 1,800 farms.

The project, which is managed by the Owyhee Irrigation District, provides water from the Owyhee Reservoir to 118,000 irrigated acres in Eastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho.

The annual assessment that irrigators pay to receive that water was raised from \$58 to \$62 an acre this year, a 6.9 percent increase. In the past 30 years, the assessment has risen by an average of 4 percent a year.

The OID's total budget is \$4 million and the additional \$268,000 in funding from this year's assessment increase will be used to continue to repair the Owyhee Project's aging infrastructure, said OID Manager Jay Chamberlin.

The project, completed in 1932, includes hundreds of miles of canals and drains. The 71-mile-long system has six pumping stations that pump supplemental water from the Snake River.

When the project was built, it had a 100-year life expectancy; it is now 85 years old.

That doesn't mean the system has 15 years left — "It certainly is going to last a lot longer than that," Chamberlin said — but it is in need of some major repairs.

"The system is getting older faster than we can keep up with the repairs on it, honestly," he said. "There is much more that needs to be done."

This year's assessment includes a \$2.50 an acre increase in the regular operations and maintenance fee



Courtesy Owyhee Irrigation District

Workers repair a section of the Owyhee Project known as the Snively Siphon, which was in danger of sliding down a hill side. The need for major repair work on the 71-mile long project is the reason Owyhee Irrigation District patrons will pay \$4 an acre more for their irrigation water this year.

and a special \$1.50 fee to help pay engineering costs for a project designed to fix the failing Malheur Siphon, work that will cost upward of \$2 million.

Major repair work recently completed on the system includes a \$450,000 project to repair the Ring Gate, an 80,000-pound spillway, and a \$250,000 project to stabilize part of the Snively Siphon that was in danger of sliding down a mountain.

Close to eight miles of new pipeline was installed in the system this past year.

A ditch break costs about \$30,000 to fix on average and the system has those every year, Chamberlin said.

The OID received some phone calls about the increase and OID board mem-

bers regularly answer questions about the assessment, said Bruce Corn, a member of the board and a local farmer.

"If you don't actually go out and see it and understand what's going on, it's hard to comprehend," he said. "It's an engineering marvel but it requires maintenance to keep it going and it's very, very expensive."

Corn said it is going to require a lot more work to keep the system in a reliable condition and that's going to cost money.

"You have siphons, tunnels and all kinds of structures and they are aging," he said. "In the foreseeable future, there is going to be one project after another and they are going to be fairly major."



Courtesy Owyhee Irrigation District

Workers perform a structural analysis of the Malheur Siphon, a key part of the Owyhee Project, which delivers irrigation water to 118,000 irrigated acres in Oregon and Idaho. The need for major repairs to the siphon and other parts of the 85-year-old project is the key reason irrigators who get their water from the system will pay \$4 an acre more for that water this year.

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### COMBINES



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