

Idaho water official set to address Congress on recharge

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

POCATELLO, Idaho — Idaho Water Resource Board Chairman Roger Chase was scheduled to address members of a congressional subcommittee on Oct. 4 about the state's proactive and unique approach towards reversing decades of declining groundwater levels in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer.

Chase was to speak to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water regarding Idaho's program of intentionally injecting surplus surface water into the aquifer, a practice known as managed recharge. The state has its own recharge water right, which avoids the need to buy water and keeps costs down.

"Really as people have looked at it, they've found our recharge program is probably one of the best in the nation," Chase said.

Chase, who will be among a small group of Western leaders presenting on their recharge efforts, said he also plans to suggest measures the federal government should take to help Idaho's program remain successful.

He'll ask Congress to approve language that would give the state greater flexibility to waive a requirement that Upper Snake canals remain closed for at least 150 days following the irrigation



Courtesy of Idaho Department of Water Resources
Aquifer recharge water spills into the Milepost 31 site along Milner-Gooding Canal. Roger Chase, chairman of the Idaho Water Resource Board, was scheduled this week to address a congressional subcommittee on the state's progressive aquifer recharge program.

season to build up Palisades Reservoir levels.

The change would help accommodate upper valley recharge using spring flood-control releases.

Chase will also request additional language facilitating recharge partnerships between the state, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Bureau of Land Management.

Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, serves on the subcommittee.

"Less federal regulation and more common sense with regards to state water rights need to be pursued," Risch said via email.

Thanks to an especially wet winter, Idaho recharged more than 315,000 acre-feet of water during the 2016-2017 recharge season, under the state's water right.

Private entities recharged 140,000 acre-feet more.

Furthermore, Idaho groundwater users have agreed to cut their well irrigation by a combined 240,000 acre-feet per year to help build the aquifer, under terms of a water call settlement, and the state has had a moratorium on new well development within the aquifer for several years.

Idaho, which recharges mostly through unlined canals and adjacent spill basins, is investing millions to build up its recharge capacity but has also capitalized on the existing infrastructure of canal companies, who receive fees to open their systems to the state's water.

"One of the things we're going to talk to Congress

about is the fact that we're using existing infrastructure, which saves us millions and millions of dollars," Chase said.

Chase is optimistic that planned infrastructure upgrades will allow the state to increase its recharge capacity by 50 to 100 percent within the next year.

He said Idaho plans to soon expand its recharge program into the Treasure Valley and Northern Idaho.

The state's recharge coordinator, Wes Hipke, was involved for years in running Arizona's recharge program. Hipke said Arizona and Idaho have the two most significant recharge programs in the U.S., and Idaho is unique in that its program aims to build up the aquifer solely for the public good, rather than to mitigate for a specific impact or as the basis for a private credit system.

Jerry Rigby, chairman of the Western States Water Council, said members of his organization are also closely following Idaho's efforts and have invited Idaho Department of Water Resources Deputy Director Mat Weaver to speak during their October meeting in New Mexico.

"We've been telling them what we've been doing with recharge, and all of the Western states are saying, 'We're interested in that. Tell us how you're doing it,'" Rigby said.



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Mandatory annual reports accounting for money received and spent in connection with the federal dairy checkoff have not been filed with Congress.

Groups press USDA on dairy checkoff oversight

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

The Organization for Competitive Markets and the National Dairy Producers Organization are calling on USDA to immediately prepare and publish mandated reports to Congress on the dairy checkoff program — after a five-year lapse under former Secretary Tom Vilsack.

USDA's failure to produce and submit the annual reports came to light through a blog by an economics professor at Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy.

That professor, Parke Wilde, told Capital Press he reads the reports for interest and uses them as source materials in teaching his students about the effectiveness of different strategies in food advertising.

But the absence of the reports struck a broader chord with groups concerned with a lack of accountability and transparency in how checkoff dollars are spent.

Dairy checkoff assessments collected in 2016 totaled \$426.9 million. Assessments for all 22 research and promotion commodity programs totaled \$885.5 million, according to a spokesman for USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, which administers the checkoff programs.

USDA's recent response to Wilde's freedom of information request was that "the annual (dairy checkoff) reports to Congress for fiscal years 2013 to 2017 have not yet been published so AMS currently has no records responsive to your request."

Under federal law, the secretary of agriculture is responsible for submitting annual reports to Congress accounting for dairy checkoff activities and spending — including an independent analysis of the effectiveness of the program.

That requirement only exists for the dairy checkoff program and not the other commodity checkoff programs, an AMS spokesman said.

Vilsack, who now serves as the president and CEO of the U.S. Dairy Export Council, was responsible for the missing reports.

OCM is asking USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue to correct the previous administration's lack of oversight, make sure the reports get done and assure going forward they get done in a timely manner, said Angela Huffman, OCM director of communications.

National Dairy Producers Organization is also calling on Perdue to fulfill his statutory obligation immediately "to correct Vilsack's failings."

Those reports describe

the activities of an accounting for the receipt and disbursement of all dairy checkoff funds, said Bob Krucker, an Idaho dairy farmer and NDPO board member. Vilsack didn't do that, so "there's been absolutely no oversight on the spending of money," he said.

Many dairy farmers question whether the money taken from them, "and it's a lot of money," is being spent properly under the checkoff rules and regulations. And they don't know because those reports haven't been submitted, he said.

OCM contends the checkoff issue is broader than the dairy reports and includes alleged improper spending and illegal activities with the beef, pork and egg checkoffs.

The missing reports follow a history of documented abuses of checkoff dollars in commodity programs and cover-up of those abuses by USDA, OCM stated.

OCM is asking Perdue to "start fresh and not let these issues continue to fester under his watch," Huffman said.

Krucker said checkoff dollars are large sums of money coming from farmers, and there's no supervision if they're being spent for the benefit of the farmers.

"All this money is not spent according to what it's supposed to be used for. It's being used for the benefit of processors and retailers but not for the actual benefit of the farmers from where it came. ... That's the rub," he said.

Checkoff promotions absolutely increase consumption and sell more product — providing more profits for processors and retailers — but it doesn't trickle down to the farmer, he said.

"Processors and retailers are making money off the backs of the farmers," he said.

As for the dairy checkoff reports, a USDA AMS spokesman told Capital Press the reports are "expected soon."

A spokesman for Dairy Management Inc. — which manages dairy checkoff money with state and regional promotion groups — said DMI annually provides USDA with the necessary information to file the reports.

Vilsack has not replied to Capital Press requests for comment as to why the reports weren't produced or submitted to Congress during his time at USDA.

Capital Press has also not received a reply to requests for comment from National Milk Producers Federation as to how news of the missing reports is being received by producers or to whether the organization was aware of the lapse in reporting.

Bill to ease Calif. water measuring regulations awaits Brown's signature

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — A bill that could save money for rural ranchers who divert water by easing a state regulation is awaiting Gov. Jerry Brown's signature.

The California Cattlemen's Association-backed legislation by Assemblyman Frank Bigelow, R-O'Neals, would change a State Water Resources Control Board rule that those who divert more than 10 acre-feet of water per year hire a licensed engineer to install a water-measuring device.

Assembly Bill 589 would allow diverters to instead install their own devices or implement their own measurement method if they take a course from the University of California Cooperative Extension, CCA officials explain.

"We've been working with the Cooperative Extension folks in terms of getting the word out on this legislation," said Kirk Wilbur, the CCA's director of legislative affairs. He said the bill would be "one piece of relief" for ranchers.

"A lot of work needs to be



Tim Hearden/Capital Press File

Billy Gatlin, left, and Kirk Wilbur of the California Cattlemen's Association talk after giving a presentation at a cattlemen's lunch at the Bryan-Morris Ranch in Etna, Calif., in 2016. A CCA-sponsored bill that would ease a regulatory burden for rural ranchers who divert water has been sent to Gov. Jerry Brown.

done moving forward to lessen the financial impacts of regulations on ranchers," he said.

The governor has until Oct. 15 to sign or veto the bill, which passed unanimously in both legislative chambers. While the UC typically doesn't take positions on legislation, it supported this bill, said Larry Forero, a UCCE adviser based in Redding.

Forero believes the course would be helpful to ranchers. He said a two-day UCCE irri-

gation course in Northeastern California filled so quickly that organizers scheduled additional dates for the course.

"You can really talk about ideas and talk about concepts, and observationally I think I've seen changes on the ground just from what we've done," Forero said.

"I think education goes a lot further than regulation on some of this stuff," he said.

The legislation comes after

the state's water board in 2016 ramped up reporting requirements for California's roughly 12,000 landowners and users who have rights to divert water from nearby streams.

The regulations require annual reporting of water diversions rather than reporting once every three years, as previous law required of senior right holders. Those who divert more than 10 acre-feet of water per year must also measure their diversions.

ODFW confirms two more cattle attacks by Harl Butte wolfpack

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

The Harl Butte wolfpack killed a calf and injured another in attacks investigated by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Sept. 29 and Oct. 1.

ODFW shot four pack members in August in what it described as an incremental response to repeated depredations.

Cattle ranchers in the area predicted the department's response wouldn't work and now are likely to renew their call to have the entire pack killed. ODFW has confirmed 10 attacks on cattle by the pack since July 2016, all within nine miles of each other. As of Oct. 4, ODFW had not announced how it will respond to the latest attacks. Even with four killed in Au-

gust, the pack is thought to consist of six adults and three pups, according to ODFW reports.

On the morning of Sept. 29, a volunteer range rider found a dead 425-pound calf on private grazing land in the Marr Flat area of Wallowa County. An estimated 40 percent of the carcass had been consumed, according to an ODFW report. Tracking col-

lar data showed a wolf designated OR-50, the only pack member wearing a collar, was at the carcass about 90 minutes before the range rider found it.

The injured calf found Oct. 1 had a large open wound on the inside of its upper left rear leg, according to ODFW, which estimated it had been attacked Sept. 25. The calf weighed 570 pounds.

Goodlatte bill aims at reliable guestworker program for agriculture

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

A much-anticipated proposal to replace the H-2A guestworker program will have to wait a little longer for review by the House Judiciary Committee.

Markup of the bill was set for Wednesday but was postponed late Tuesday, with a committee aide saying the committee wants additional time to work on the bill.

Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., introduced the bill Monday, saying a re-

placement for the "outdated and broken" H-2A program is long overdue.

His Agricultural Guestworker Act (AG Act) creates a new H-2C guestworker program to provide farmers with access to a legal, stable supply of workers for year-round employment.

Under the proposal, foreign workers would be allowed an initial stay of 36 months. Subsequent visas for year-round agricultural jobs and all other H-2C visas would afford a work period of 18 months.

It would allow current

undocumented workers in agriculture to get an H-2C visa and provides for 500,000 H-2C visas a year with allowances to adjust that number depending on agricultural labor needs.

In addition, the program would give employers the option of providing housing and transportation for their workers — provisions that are required under the H-2A program. It would also put administration under USDA.

"We are very, very pleased after a long time of waiting, the dairy industry can look

forward to utilizing a visa program for full-time employment," said Laurie Fischer, CEO of the American Dairy Coalition.

H-2A is for temporary and seasonal workers, and the dairy industry is not able to utilize that program at all. If passed, the bill will be the first time the dairy industry will have a visa program to ensure a stable workforce, she said.

The bill would also streamline the process and expedite the time between employers applying for workers and receiving them. Because

of the bureaucratic red tape in the H-2A program, harvest is often already finished before the process is completed. Putting the new program under USDA should also increase understanding of agricultural needs, she said.

National Milk Producers Federation said Goodlatte's legislation is a rare opportunity to resolve several of the most challenging aspects of how to create a legal means of addressing the supply and demand elements affecting agriculture.

"America's dairy farm-

ers and other employers who have perennial and not just seasonal labor needs desperately require a workable program that allows them to access a consistent, legal and dependable workforce," the organization said in a written statement.

NMPF stated the proposal recognizes the status quo is unacceptable and that enforcement-only measures could prove disastrous for the farm sector and cannot be the first or only basis for fixing the broken immigration system.