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Opinion

Our View

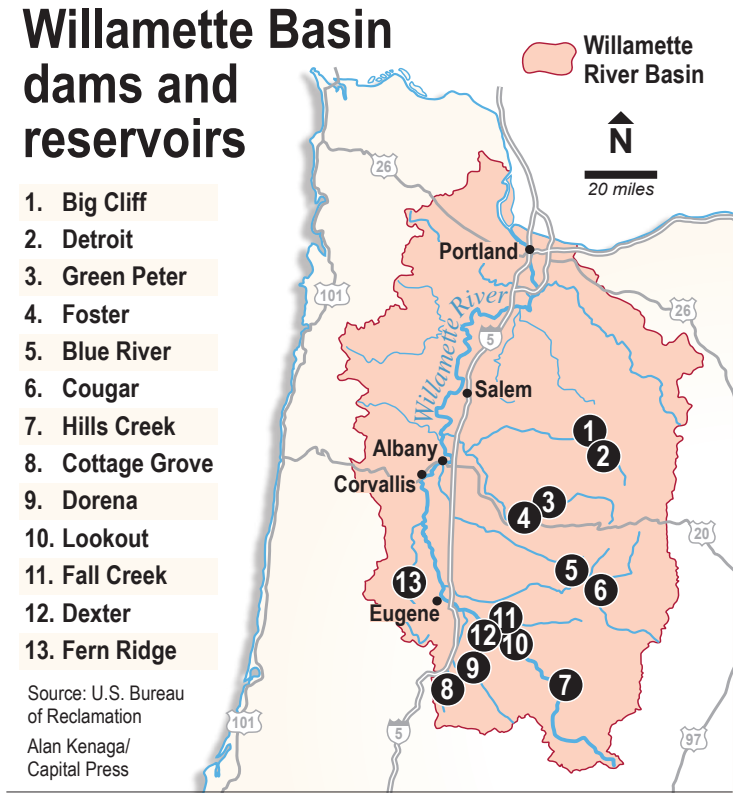
Agriculture the most important use of water

When it comes to farming in the West, all you have to do is add water.

With water, the West has blossomed. Take a look at the vast Columbia Basin in Washington and the Snake River valley in southern Idaho. And the Central Valley in California. And all of Eastern Oregon.

Anywhere water is available, the predominant color is green, with high-value and high-yield crops dotting the countryside. Without water, the countryside is brown or growing dryland crops with much lower yields.

In Western Oregon, especially the Willamette Valley, water has been less of an issue. Owing to a healthy annual rainfall, many farmers have done well without the benefit of irrigation. With irrigation, others grow an impressive variety of high-value crops, from the nearly $1 billion-a-year nursery industry — the largest ag sector in the state — to livestock and specialty crops. The valley nurtures a robust agricultural industry, complete with food processors and exporters. Six of the state's top 10 agricultural counties are in the Willamette Valley, including Marion County, the top producer with more than $600 million in agricultural production.



For that reason, if no other, we would expect Oregon leaders to make the well-being of Willamette Valley agriculture a top priority.

That's why a couple of recent studies should be concerning to them and anyone involved in Oregon agriculture.

A recently announced study by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has set off a debate among the region's water users, including farmers and ranchers. In it, the Corps, with help from the Oregon Water Resources Department, has decided that only 16 percent of the nearly 1.6 million acre-feet stored by 13 federal dams in the Willamette Valley would be used for irrigation. By contrast, 60 percent would be set aside for fish and wildlife.

The Corps is seeking comments on that. Here's ours: More water is needed for agriculture. A lot more.

Any limit on irrigation represents a limit on agriculture. Cropping patterns are constantly changing. As water becomes available, that means farmers can grow higher-value crops and get higher yields.

To cut off irrigation at such a paltry amount tells farmers and ranchers that they aren't a priority despite their success as stewards of the land and economic drivers for the state. It's as though the amount of water designated for agriculture was an afterthought.

Another study, by Oregon State University, adds alarm to our reaction to the Corps and OWRD study. It predicts that by the turn of the next century, Willamette Valley farmers will be irrigating more because of the changing climate. It also found that the lack of infrastructure — pipelines and canals — to distribute water around the valley will limit irrigation. More infrastructure can be built, but more water can't be made.

Another concern that came out of the OSU study was that the region's growing population will ultimately max out the water supplies of several cities. That means as more water goes to flushing toilets and other household uses, agriculture faces the possibly of being squeezed out.

Agriculture should not be seen as just another use of water. It should be seen as the most important use. Farmers and ranchers produce the food we all eat. Doing that requires water.

Readers' views

Monarchs have other challenges, too

Regarding "Monarch habitat restoration benefits farmers, environment," I read the above guest comment by Robert Gilpin with great interest, and who could not applaud his efforts to urge farmers to join in the restoration of the monarch's habitat. However well intentioned, the article has several problems that will be apparent to anyone who has followed the decline of the monarch species.

First, Mr. Giblin describes the "complex reasons" for the monarch's decline including "loss of habitat, weather and climate change, predators, pathogens and parasites and less overwintering habitat in Mexico." Oddly, not a word about the connection of the decline of the monarch and the use of agricultural pesticides. Two types of pesticides in particular: the use of herbicides at field margins which allow the farmer to be more efficient and control weeds, but contribute to the acute loss of habitat for milkweed and thus a food source for the monarch larvae. Mr. Giblin neglected to place any blame for the loss of habitat on the efficiency of our modern agricultural system.

Similarly glossed over was any relationship between agricultural insecticide use and a decline in monarch populations. This oversight could be expected as he is addressing an agricultural audience and wouldn't wish to either offend anyone or place agribusiness interests or the American Farm Bureau Federation in a poor light. However, anyone who has ever applied pesticides is clearly aware that insecticidal spray drift into margins can contribute to the decline of both pollinators in general and monarchs.

Secondly, the column did not mention any connection between GMO BT corn pollen and monarchs. Cornell University research demonstrated the link between BT toxin and monarch larval death (Cornell Chronicle April 19, 1995). Pollen that contains the BT toxin from GMO corn can drift to milkweed habitat at field margins, turning it from a habitat of hopeful restoration into a lethal trap.

It is like there is a type of "political correctness" within the agricultural community that can't seem to bring itself to any kind of self-critique even when it is the elephant in the room. Yes, there are manifold reasons for the monarch's decline, but let's be honest about it and be willing to admit modern agriculture's role in the problem. At the same time, I'm 100 percent in line with Mr. Giblin's desire to encourage farmers, homeowners and other landowners to collaborate and help restore a truly awesome species.

Brian Quigley
Camano Island, Wash.

Our View

Study opens door for solution to CANOLA CONFLICT

Results of a recent study by Oregon State University strongly suggests canola production could coexist with specialty seed crops in the Willamette Valley.

We hope farmers can see this as an opportunity to put a longstanding disagreement to rest, and work out a way to meet everyone's needs.

The valley is home to a variety of specialty seed farmers. They grow high-value crops in relatively small quantities.

The valley is also home to farmers who want to grow canola, a relatively low-value crop that can be grown in large quantities.

Canola production in Oregon's Willamette Valley has always been controversial.

Canola produces tiny, oil-rich seeds that can be crushed for food oil or biofuel, and the seed pulp is fed to dairy cows. It doesn't require irrigation and can be planted and harvested with the same equipment used for grass seed and wheat.

Farmers see canola as a valuable crop to grow in rotation with grass and grains.

But specialty seed growers and the seed companies that contract their acreage worry that large-scale canola production could hurt their business.

Vegetable seeds grown for garden and commercial use have to meet strict genetic requirements. Growers worry that canola could cross pollinate with other Brassicas, such as Swiss chard.

Actual contamination wouldn't have to occur, they say. The perception could harm their reputation with buyers.

They also worry that large-scale canola production will create pest and disease issues.

As a result, canola production in the valley has been heavily restricted.

In 2013 the Oregon Department of Agriculture decided to loosen those restrictions.

The Legislature stepped in, placing a six-year moratorium on most canola production in 2013 at the request of the specialty seed industry. It also commissioned a study of the impacts of canola production on a 500-acre test plot on the specialty seed industry.

According to the study, canola poses no greater threat to specialty seed producers than other Brassica species regularly grown in the valley.

The results strengthen the case that canola can coexist with other crops. And because the study was commissioned by lawmakers, it weakens the specialty seed growers' argument for strict regulations.

The OSU report has now been turned over to ODA, which has another year to develop recommendations for canola cultivation in the region.

The Willamette Valley Specialty Seed Association has invited canola growers to join in a map "pinning" system designed to maintain isolation distances and avoid cross-pollination among species.

It would still like some limit on production to reduce pest and disease issues.

Canola farmers balk at limits on their Brassica where none exist for radish or turnip seeds grown for cover crops. They need enough production to maintain a viable, food-grade vegetable oil industry.

There seems to be some agreement that farmers can work all this out, and present ODA with a plan that it can regulate for both sides.

We like the idea of farmers working out their differences among themselves. It's a solution that's long overdue.

PHOTO: Bumble bees and a honeybees pollinate canola flowers. A Oregon State University report has now been turned over to the Oregon Department of Agriculture, which has another year to develop recommendations for canola cultivation in the region. Photo by Lynn Ketchum/OSU

Guest comment
Cyndie Shearing

Time for turkey trivia

By CYNDIE SHEARING
For the Capital Press

Looking for some interesting, lesser-known facts related to Thanksgiving? Check out the turkey trivia below.

Beard: Black lock of hair found on the chest of male turkeys.

Flock: Large group of turkeys.

Hen: Female turkey.

North Carolina, Minnesota and Indiana: Top three states for turkey production.

Poult: Baby turkey.

Snood: Long, red, fleshy growth that hangs down over the beak.

Tom: Male turkey.

Wattle: Bright red appendage on the neck.

28 days: Time it takes a turkey egg to hatch.

$49.12: Total average cost for a classic Thanksgiving dinner for 10 people (less than $5 per person) including a 16-pound turkey, according to the American Farm Bureau Federation.

Speaking of trivia, the folks at the Butterball Turkey Talk-Line started a petition proposing a Thanksgiving turkey emoji to Unicode, the nonprofit organization that oversees the coding standards for texting and emoji.

According to Thanksgiving turkey emoji supporters, "Every other major holiday has at least one emoji. There's fireworks, champagne and noise-makers for New Year's Eve; cupid hearts for Valentine's Day; ghosts and jack-o-lanterns for Halloween and so much more. But Thanksgiving, the most-celebrated holiday in the country, doesn't have an emoji that truly captures the occasion."

Get more fun facts and trivia about farming and agriculture by ordering a "Food and Farm Facts" trivia card set for $10 online at http://bit.ly/2mvXxlk. With more than 250 questions on 46 playing cards, the set brings a popular game element to important national agricultural statistics. In a classroom or living room, the cards test players' knowledge about agricultural production, sustainability and nutrition. Cards are aligned to the American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture's 2017 Food and Farm Facts book.

Cyndie Shearing is director of internal communications at the American Farm Bureau Federation.