

Farmers seek additional releases from reservoir

Army Corps finds ‘no significant impact’ in proposal

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

Calls to release an additional 1,000 acre-feet of stored irrigation water from Willow Creek Reservoir in Eastern Oregon will not significantly impact the local environment, according to a draft report issued March 2 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The Corps operates Willow Creek Dam near Heppner, Ore., primarily for flood control, irrigation and recreation. Farmers currently receive 2,500 acre-feet of water from the reservoir during the irrigation season, from April 16 to Oct. 31, though the Willow Creek District Improvement Co. has requested an increase to 3,500 acre-feet, which would relieve stress on groundwater wells.

Willow Creek Reservoir already stores 3,500 acre-feet of water for irrigation, said Brian Thompson, district president. The change merely allows farmers and ranchers to access the full amount.

“Right now, the main reason we want to go back after this is groundwater,” Thompson said. “Our groundwater for our homes and cities is going the wrong way.”

Long-term irrigation water releases from the reservoir are established by an environmental assessment completed by the Corps in 2008. A recently completed supplemental analysis found releasing an additional 1,000 acre-feet would have no significant environ-



Courtesy of Kacee Lathrop

The Heppner-Lexington Diversion Pipeline, which carries supplemental irrigation water from Willow Creek Reservoir in Eastern Oregon.

mental impact — meaning the Corps would not need to conduct a full environmental impact study under the National Environmental Policy Act.

Public comment on the draft findings will continue through Monday, April 2. Lauren Bennett, a spokeswoman for the Corps Portland District, said the agency may update its recommendation based on the comments received.

Irrigation water from Willow Creek Reservoir serves roughly 11 landowners over 20 miles between the cities of Heppner and Ione in Morrow County. Thompson said the district does not intend to put any new acres in production, but rather supplement existing acres used to grow alfalfa, grain and high-value vegetables such as potatoes.

“It just gives us access to a renewable, calculated amount

of water,” he said.

The district applied for the change in 2015 to the Bureau of Reclamation, which handles water storage contracts for the reservoir. Three years later, the Corps has determined there would “little to no incremental effect” on water quality, vegetation and wildlife.

The biggest short-term impact may be lower reservoir levels between May and January, the report states, which could potentially impact boating and fishing. For the last two years, the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife has released several thousand extra large trophy trout into the reservoir, part of a statewide program to promote economic development in rural areas.

With additional water releases from the reservoir, the boat dock may not be usable for several weeks in the sum-

mer during drought years. However, Thompson added the reservoir historically experiences seasonal blue-green algae blooms during this period, when people are urged to stay away from the water for health and safety reasons.

“We have a glue-green algae bloom before we even start drawing (for irrigation), usually,” he said. “The water turns to pea soup.”

Bennett said the Corps has acknowledged that water quality may worsen at the reservoir with increased irrigation releases, leading to an increase in blue-green algae blooms. However, degraded water quality “would not rise to a significant level under NEPA.”

The agency also consulted with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, which discussed its intention to reintroduce steelhead into Willow Creek “at some future time,” though the Corps says potential reintroduction of the fish remains uncertain.

Thompson said increasing the amount of surface water available to farmers will actually have a net positive environmental impact, protecting increasingly vulnerable groundwater in an area that receives little annual precipitation.

“I have three wells myself, and I don’t intend to run them unless I have to,” he said. “That would be a huge environmental benefit.”

Comments on the Corps’ draft assessment can be sent to the Corps Portland District office, care of District Engineer Kathleen Wells, P.O. Box 2946, Portland, OR 97208-2946, or email willow-creek@usace.army.mil.

EO Media Events announces 2019 Northwest Ag Show

Capital Press

SALEM — EO Media Events, LLC, has announced the 2019 Northwest Ag Show will be Jan. 16-18, at the Oregon State Fair & Exhibition Center.

The 49th edition of the event will focus on the emerging trends in the ag industry such as small farming, technology and education. It will provide useful information to attendees regarding equipment, best practices, job training and state-sanctioned certifications as well as legal and financial issues facing large-scale and small-scale farming.

“We are pleased to offer vendors and attendees a new experience designed to celebrate the importance of agriculture and agriculture-related businesses in our region,” said Heidi Wright, chief operating officer of EO Media Group, owners of EO Media Events, LLC, and the

Capital Press. “The all-new show will build upon the legacy of the event founded by Jim and Shirley Heather and continued by long-time managers Amy and Mike Patrick.”

In addition to a new location, the show will also be held in mid-January to coincide with the Salem Area Chamber of Commerce’s SAIF Agri-Business Banquet on Friday, Jan. 18. These two events will form the foundation of an Ag Week celebration for the Salem area.

The Capital Press and its sister EO Media Group publications will market the event throughout the year with a comprehensive campaign across Oregon and the Northwest through print, online, social media, database marketing and partnerships with other organizations.

More information about the show can be found at NWAgShow.com.

Lawmakers make few tweaks to Oregon farm laws in 2018

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

SALEM — A “cap-and-trade” proposal to limit carbon emissions didn’t pass muster during Oregon’s 2018 legislative session, comforting critics who feared increased fuel, fertilizer and electricity costs.

Several other less-prominent bills related to agriculture also died in committee when the Legislature adjourned March 3, including a proposal to link depredation funding to the size of Oregon’s wolf population.

The bill was supported by ranchers, who said it made sense to increase compensation for livestock losses and preventive measures as the predators grew more common.

However, the proposal was criticized by environmental groups who claimed there’s opportunity for fraud and abuse in the disbursement of existing compensation funds.

A proposal to clarify that water transfers are allowable between storage reservoirs likewise died in committee, though lawmakers, irrigators and other interested parties

were negotiating the issue before the start of the 2019 legislative session.

Land use bills that would allow more commercial and industrial development on farmland in Eastern Oregon and the eventual urbanization of 1,700 acres of “rural reserve” in Washington County did not gain traction.

However, land use laws did receive a couple minor tweaks.

Lawmakers clarified that earlier legislation easing the construction of “accessory dwelling units,” commonly called “granny flats,” only applied within urban growth boundaries.

They also made clear that equine therapy activities are allowed within “exclusive farm use” zones.

Statutory language related to hemp production was brought in line with the 2014 Farm Bill, which is intended to allow Oregon State University Extension agents to help hemp farmers.

In addition, House Bill 4089 creates a certification program at OSU to verify different varieties of hemp seed in the same manner other seed crops grown in Oregon are verified.

Rural brewery runs into Oregon zoning problems

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

The popularity of a remote Oregon brewery has caused it to run into problems with state zoning restrictions for agritourism activities on farmland.

Located along a rural road between Coburg and Harrisburg, Agrarian Ales has operated for nearly six years under an on-farm processing permit from Lane County.

All the hops needed for its “farmhouse brews” are grown on the property, as are about 50 other crops.

Initially, the rural brewery only intended to give out four-ounce samples and sell to-go “growlers” of beer, but it soon became apparent that visitors wanted to linger and imbibe on-site.

“We bring the urban public out to farm country to enjoy the beauty,” said Stephen Harrell, the company’s farm manager. “Our business grew because the public demonstrated there was a need.”

Roughly 95 percent of the company’s revenues are now derived from its tasting room, which consists of tables and benches beneath the brewery’s roof overhang.

To allow people to drink alcohol, Agrarian Ales obtained a permit from the Oregon Liquor Control Commission that stipulated food must also be served at the facility.

The brewery’s evolution into a destination for food, drink and live music has now brought it into conflict with



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

A view of Agrarian Ales Brewing Company, Eugene, Ore.

officials from Lane County, who say these activities exceed what’s allowed in the “exclusive farm use” zone.

In late February, the county shut down the brewery’s tasting room — apart from land use issues, officials cited safety problems at the facility because it’s not designed for public occupancy.

Agrarian Ales may not be able to continue operating due to the regulatory action, as its off-site beer sales are still in their “infancy,” Harrell said.

“It threatens the very existence of our business,” he said.

Lane County has issued a statement that it “hopes to find a way to help a beloved and thriving rural business operate” while protecting public safety and meeting Oregon’s zoning rules for farmland.

Another popular rural brewery — the Chatoe Rogue in Polk County — is able to

serve food and beer under a special permit for commercial activity in conjunction with farm use.

That permit was approved because the tasting room promotes hops cultivated on the farm, said Austin McGuigan, director of Polk County’s planning division.

Harrell said his company has tried to obtain such a special permit from Lane County without success. According to the county, the applications submitted by Agrarian Ales were incomplete.

The building code issues present another problem for the brewery.

“If there is no path forward on the land use, it’s pointless for us to upgrade our building,” said Harrell.

Landowners can disagree

that a permit application is incomplete and force a county government to make a decision, though the decision typically won’t go in their favor, said Bill Kabeiseman, a land use attorney with the Bateman Seidel law firm.

It’s generally difficult to win approval for food service under a permit for commercial use in conjunction with agriculture, he said.

“There tends to be a strong reaction to people selling prepared food on farmland,” Kabeiseman said. “That’s historically been a problem.”

While it’s permissible to sell farm products on-site as part of a “farm stand,” such structures can’t be used for “banquets, public gatherings and public entertainment” under Lane County code.

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ROP-8-3-4/HOU

Weekly fieldwork report

Item/description	Ore.	Wash.	Idaho	Calif.
• Snow water equivalent*	60.9%	108%	90.4%	50.8%
• Percent area in drought	76.1%	8.3%	44.3%	91.5%
• Avg. temperature, 6-10 day outlook (Percent chance deviation from normal)	Normal/ 50% below	33% above/ 33% below	33% above/ Normal	33-60% below
• Precipitation, 6-10 day outlook (Percent chance deviation from normal)	40-50% above	40% above	40-50% above	40-60% above
• Soil moisture anomaly (Monthly deviation from normal)	Normal/ Below normal	Normal/ Above normal	Normal/ Above normal	Below normal

*Aggregate average percent of median as of Feb. 27. Medians calculated for the period from 1981-2010.

Sources: USDA, NRCS; NOAA, www.ca.gov/; www.drought.gov/

YOUR FARM TIRE HEADQUARTERS

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