

Water infrastructure discussed at Family Farm Alliance conference

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Capital Press

When it comes to critical water infrastructure in the West, U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet says it is about more than dams, pipes and canals.

Water security begins in the forest, along streams and rivers that flow through farms and communities, Bennet, D-Colo., said during the Family Farm Alliance annual conference.

“As a country, we have to treat America’s landscape as essential infrastructure,” Bennet said. “Our forests are as essential to the western economy as the Lincoln Tunnel or George Washington Bridge is to New York.”

Bennet, who has served 11 years on the Senate Agriculture Committee, recently

introduced legislation that would establish a \$60 billion outdoor restoration fund, supporting active forest management and watershed restoration projects at a time when climate change is contributing to more extreme weather and large wildfires.

Broadly speaking, infrastructure should be a top priority for members of the new Congress, Bennet said. Once they pass the latest round of COVID-19 relief, Bennet said he expects they will pivot quickly to a comprehensive bill addressing the country’s aging roads, highways and bridges.

Century-old water infrastructure must be part of that package, Bennet said. His bill, the Outdoor Restoration Force Act, would also spur federal investment in west-



George Plaven/Capital Press File

Efforts in Congress would fund maintenance work on the nation’s water infrastructure.

ern lands and create more than 2 million jobs.

While Bennet acknowledged \$60 billion is a large price tag, he insisted the money would be better spent upfront rather than fighting fires on the back end.

“This is about the federal government taking respon-

sibility for these national assets, which are the national forests,” he said. “These forests are our water infrastructure really as much as any physical infrastructure.”

Addressing infrastructure was identified as a top priority for the nonprofit Family Farm Alliance, based in

Klamath Falls, Ore., in 2021. The organization held its two-day virtual conference Feb. 18-19, featuring panel discussions with both legislators and top officials of the Bureau of Reclamation.

Reclamation Commissioner Brenda Burman said there are few communities in the West that aren’t dealing with aging infrastructure that poses environmental and water supply threats.

“There have been fixes through Congress. We know we are going to need more,” she said.

Just before the end of 2020, Congress did pass a suite of water-related bills as part of a federal omnibus spending package. One of those, the Water Supply Infrastructure Rehabilitation and Utilization Act, pre-

viously introduced by Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., and Sen. Martha McSally, R-Ariz., creates an “Aging Infrastructure Account” for maintenance work on bureau projects.

Newhouse and Rep. Jim Costa, D-Calif., told the organization that, while the account still needs funding, it was an important first step in prioritizing water infrastructure.

“This was a huge win, I think, for our communities,” Newhouse said. “We’ve got to continue with that momentum.”

A roundtable discussion with regional leaders for the Bureau of Reclamation underscored the importance of ensuring water infrastructure remains modern, durable and efficient.

U.S. potato exports show signs of improvement

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

U.S. potato exports continue to recover but remain below year-earlier levels as COVID-19 impacts persist.

Potatoes USA said exports increased between the marketing year’s first and second quarters. The marketing year began July 1.

Demand started coming off its spring and summer lows in October, and by December was decreasing at a much lower rate, Chief Marketing Officer John Toasporn said.

July-December 2019 exports set record highs.

“Those markets like Korea, Taiwan and even Japan that have done a good job in controlling the pandemic and in minimizing economic impact have done quite well,” he said.

Exports remain lower in markets such as the Philippines, where pandemic control has been less successful and strong restrictions remain.

Idaho Potato Commission International Marketing Director Ross Johnson sees generally good volumes, depending on the destination.

“In Mexico, things are going extremely well on the fresh side and also are doing well on the dehydrated side,” he said. Idaho potato exports are trending about 3% ahead of year-earlier levels in fresh and about 1% ahead in dehydrated volume.

In Asia, “we are struggling in all ports,” Johnson said. Containers have been difficult to book and later to arrive as ports carry out COVID-19 restrictions that contribute to the backlog.

Toasporn said demand has been low in Europe, particularly for frozen potatoes, “so now that glut of product we see moving throughout the world at very low prices is an additional factor. That is going to be a continuing drag on exports even as many of



U.S. Potato Board

A load of U.S. potatoes is unloaded in Guatemala. U.S. potato exports are regaining ground in some countries.

these markets continue to increase demand.”

He said Thailand and Vietnam are among the countries impacted by reduced international travel and tourism, another factor in demand for potatoes at U.S. restaurant chains’ international sites.

Potatoes USA reported frozen-product exports dropped by 17% for July-December from a year earlier but lost less ground late in the period. Exports to the Philippines and China fell, though China improved in December.

A strong December also trimmed Central America’s declines. Other July-December results included moderate declines in Taiwan and Japan, a small gain in South Korea and an increase in Mexico, aided by a strong December and earlier removal of retaliatory tariffs.

U.S. exports of dehydrated potato products fell 4% in July-December, including a 7% drop in December, Potatoes USA said.

U.S. supply issues played a major role. Exports to China and the Philippines dropped while exports to South Korea, Japan, Canada and Mexico increased. Canada is the largest market for dehydrated products, followed by Mexico.

The future of wine: changing consumers, new technologies

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

The wine industry is headed toward more digitalization, technology use and new markets.

At the virtual Oregon Wine Symposium this week, several speakers talked about how the wine industry’s future may look different than its past, with consumer preferences changing, new technologies available and more shoppers eager to buy online.

“Things have changed forever, and COVID was the great accelerator,” said Steve Brown, a business consultant and technologist who calls himself a “futurist.”

Brown was the keynote speaker during Tuesday’s main virtual session.

What consumers want

Brown said consumers — especially young consumers — are making several major shifts in their purchasing behaviors compared to previous generations.

More shoppers, Brown said, are becoming “conscious consumers,” eager to know their wine was produced in a sustainable way and that workers were treated well.

Shoppers today also crave less mystery and more transparency.

Even in the traditionally sophisticated wine sector, Brown said consumer polls and purchasing data show people, especially younger drinkers, want more inclusivity and access as opposed to wine’s traditionally exclusive nature.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press File

Chardonnay grapes at Hyland Estates in Dundee, Ore.

Brown said wineries should think about changing their “snobby” image, which he dubbed “de-snobification.”

Consumers, he said, are now also looking for more personalization, online buying options, experience-focused purchases, innovations and more convenience.

Futuristic technology

The other major change in the wine sector, Brown said, is that it’s headed in a more technological direction, in the supermarket, winery and vineyard.

On the marketing side, Brown cited digital services like Wine4.Me, an interactive tool which recommends wines to buyers based on their answers to questions like how much spice, sweetness, body and oak flavor they like in their wine.

An even more entry-

level digital tool for rookie wine drinkers is called Tasty, which asks shoppers simple questions such as, “How do you feel about the smell of flowers?” Based on the consumer’s answers, the tool recommends wines that could suit the person’s palate, providing a digital sommelier-like experience.

Brown said wineries should think about how they can label their bottles, potentially using labels that signal a particular wine’s characteristics.

In the winery, some vineyards are turning to computational blending, a type of Artificial Intelligence system that helps winemakers create blends that meet specific needs or appeal to particular demographics.

Some conference attendees seemed enthusiastic in their comments: “This is amazing!”

Others appeared skeptical.

“Would small, hands-on wineries really use this kind of computation blending?” wrote Lindsay Neilson, a wine scholar, in the virtual chat.

In the vineyard, Brown said, there’s room for technological innovation, too.

Precision agriculture is making its way into wine grape growing. In higher-end vineyards, fruit-picking robots are beginning to emerge. Some vineyards are using ultraviolet light treatments and other technologies to combat powdery mildew, a fungal disease. Some growers are even using Burro “cobots,” a type of robot that collaborates with humans, to carry heavy buckets.

“The world is changing,” said Brown, the consultant. “You need to innovate to remain competitive.”

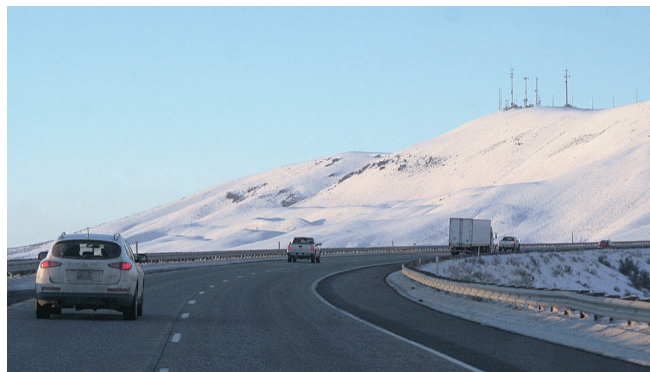
Farmers watch wheat crop after cold snap, wind

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Washington wheat growers will be monitoring their crops closely following a mid-February cold snap that brought low temperatures, wind and snow to the eastern portion of the state.

Some winter damage is possible, said Glen Squires, CEO of the Washington Grain Commission.

“I think we’re fortunate that for the most part this snow cover started coming about the right time to give some protection,” Squires said.



Capital Press File

Low temperatures, snow and wind have wheat farmers keeping a close eye on their crops in Eastern Washington.

“It was a pretty mild winter, really, until we got that cold snap from the arctic (air mass) that came

down,” said Steven Van Horn, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Spokane.

Temperatures dipped across the region Feb. 11-13. A low of 9 degrees Fahrenheit was recorded Feb. 12 at Spokane International Airport.

Snow arrived Feb. 14, resulting in roughly 5 inches in a three-day span.

The snow will provide some needed moisture, Squires said. He’d heard concerns from the commission board and the Washington Association of Wheat Growers leadership prior to the change in weather.

“People weren’t freaking out but we did have a little less moisture,” he

said. “This snow is helpful because it also brings moisture.”

The combination of cold and wind caused some concern about crop damage, Squires said.

“Obviously (we’ll have to) wait for some time to see if there was some damage,” he said.

In January, winds reached 70 mph, Van Horn said.

More snow fell the evening of Feb. 18, 1 to 2 inches around Spokane and more to the southeast, Van Horn said. Roughly half an inch to 1 inch fell Feb. 19.

Temperatures rose into the 40s over the weekend and into the week of Feb. 22.

Van Horn also expected wind gusts of 35 to 40 mph.

“The snow that we have is going to melt — whether we melt all of it, I’m not quite sure,” he said. “But we will melt quite a bit of it, because it’s going to be quite windy.”

The wind won’t cause “a whole lot of damage,” he said.

March predictions favor below-normal temperatures and normal precipitation. More snow is possible, but won’t likely stick around, Van Horn said.

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