

Second half of Columbia Basin Project completion depends on ‘political will’

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Completing the second half of the Columbia Basin Project depends on “political will,” said Vicky Scharlau, executive director of the Columbia Basin Development League.

And time — lots of it. “This is a long time and a lot of money,” Scharlau told stakeholders during the league’s March 4 virtual conference.

The federal project delivers water to 671,000 acres of farmland, roughly 65% of the 1.03 million acres originally planned.

Lawmakers recently asked the organization for a one-page document that fully explains what it would take to complete the project. It includes the expected length of time to complete each step:

Step one — Authorization (completed): The project was authorized in 1945.

Step two — Key partners commit to financial support: The federal Bureau of Reclamation must work with a non-federal cost-share partner that agrees to match funding for all studies. The “logical” partner is the State of Washington, Scharlau said.

“This means a commitment by both the governor



The John Keys Pump Generation Plant intakes at the Grand Coulee Dam. The 12 pumps send water from the Columbia River to Banks Lake and 670,000 acres of farmland in the Columbia Basin Project in Central Washington state. Work is underway to provide more water to farms and cities in the region.

Bureau of Reclamation

and the state Legislature, because they would have to agree to a multi-year, multi-biennium commitment,” Scharlau said.

Step three — Appraisal study: Studies for feasible alternatives and water supply availability must take place first in order for the

bureau to proceed, Scharlau said.

“There is adequate supply of water for all 1,029,000 acres,” she said.

The state issued a storage certificate for 6.4 million acre-feet to Reclamation in 1938, and has a secondary permit for 3.2

million acre-feet for land now served. Reclamation would need an additional secondary permit for 2 million acre-feet from the state to complete the project.

Step four — Plan of study: The plan of study document lays the foundation for a feasibility study.

The partners — Congress and the Washington State Legislature — would fund the study. The plan would take at least two years.

Step five — Feasibility study: The feasibility study would take at least five years and provide a detailed evaluation of the

entire project, including federal requirements such as Principles, Requirements and Guidelines for Water Implementation Studies, the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Fish & Wildlife Coordination Act and the Endangered Species Act.

The planning partners would identify which options are feasible for federal funding. The study and recommended decision would then be submitted to the secretary of the Interior and Office of Management and Budget, which determine whether it would go to Congress for funding.

The planning partners must also complete a planning report on the design work and costs and environmental impact statement, among other requirements.

The estimated costs for steps three, four and five are \$25 million.

Step six — Construction: Construction is estimated to take at least 10 years and cost \$3 billion to \$5 billion.

Additional costs for off-channel storage construction may be needed if it is found that Columbia River flows are not adequate to support diversions during the irrigation season, according to the paper.

Lights out for bill to let Washington counties nix solar panels on farms

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — A bill to give counties and cities rather than an unelected state board the power to approve or reject solar panel arrays on farmland has failed.

Sen. Judy Warnick, R-Moses Lake, said Saturday she was disappointed. She introduced Senate Bill 5206 to bar the Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council from overriding local opposition to solar panels taking over farmland.

The bill stemmed from a proposal to build a 235-acre solar project on farmland in Kittitas County, a sunny and agricultural-rich region in Central Washington.

County commissioners were opposed. Public meetings in the county were well attended and many residents commented for and against the project.

In the end, in 2018, seven unelected state employees, meeting in Olympia, outvoted by 7-1 a Kittitas County commissioner and recommended that Gov. Jay Inslee approve the project. He did.

“I’d like to revise that process and make it better for people who want to see these projects sited, but sited in the right place,” Warnick said.

“There’s got to be a middle ground,” she said. “I’ll be back. I’d like to have more conversations about it.”

The energy site council was formed in 1970 to approve large energy projects, such as oil refineries, nuclear power plants and natural gas pipelines. It has added to its portfolio any wind or solar project.

Rather than go through local governments, renewable power developers seeking permits have the option to go to the state council for an “expedited process.”

The committee’s chairwoman, Kathleen Drew, and a renewable energy advocate testified against Warnick’s bill, warning it could hinder the state’s transformation to carbon-free electricity.

The bill died in the Senate Environment, Energy and Technology Committee. Another bill that would have added tribes to the energy site council and expanded the projects the council could approve also died.

Kittitas County commissioners had passed a moratorium on solar energy projects on farmland.

By law, projects approved by the energy site council must follow local land rules.

The council concluded the moratorium was neither a “land-use plan” nor “zoning ordinance.”

The council also said that by putting the panels on “disturbed farmland” the project would avoid “environmentally sensitive areas.”

A council member remarked before the final vote that the solar panels have a projected life of 30 years so covering the farmland wasn’t a “permanent conversion.”

Biden names new agriculture adviser

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The White House has announced Kelliann Blazek as the new special assistant to the president for agriculture and rural policy.

The White House rural envoy will work closely with the executive branch, especially the USDA.

Blazek’s role will include advising the president on policies related to rural investments and infrastructure, including improving roads and expanding internet access in rural areas.

Her appointment comes after some farm-state lawmakers and rural advo-



Kelliann Blazek

cates pressed Biden to name a White House policy point person to focus on challenges in rural America.

Blazek was one of several policy staff appointed by Biden Friday.

“These qualified, impressive and dedicated individuals reflect the diversity and strength of America and will play critical roles advancing the Biden-Harris administration’s commitment to tackling the crises we face and building back our country better,” a White House statement said Friday about the new appointees.

According to a White House statement, Blazek most recently served as the first director of Wisconsin’s Office of Rural Prosperity, an agency created by Gov. Tony Evers in 2020 to support the state’s rural communities.

Prior to holding that position, at different times, Blazek worked as counsel to U.S. Rep. Chellie Pingree, D-Maine, taught food and law policy at George Mason University, worked at the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic and the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.

Blazek holds a degree from the University of Wisconsin Law School and grew up on her family’s farm in Wisconsin.

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