

Wheat farmers ponder Simpson's next dam moves

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

MOSCOW, Idaho — Northwest wheat industry leaders say Idaho Rep. Mike Simpson's plan to remove four dams on the lower Snake River has little support.

But they worry about what the Republican congressman could do to push the plan through anyway.

Idaho Wheat Commission, Oregon Wheat Commission and Washington Grain Commission leaders discussed their next steps June 9 in Moscow, Idaho.

"We just recognize that the Snake River issue is getting huge," said Glen Squires, CEO of the Washington commission.

Simpson has not proposed any legislation regarding his \$33.5 billion

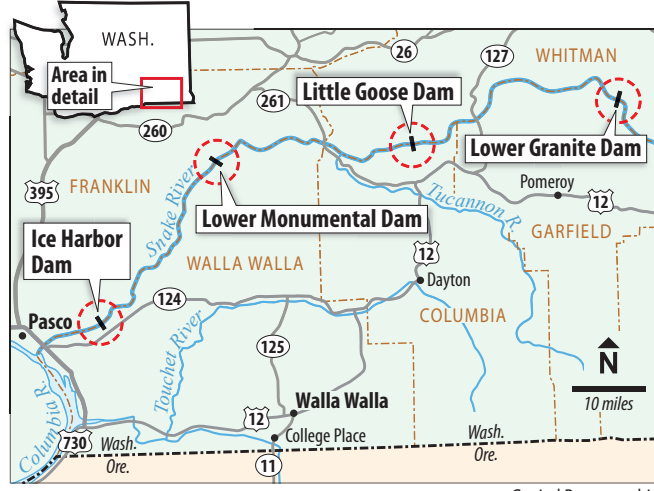
plan, which he announced in February.

Following a recent Idaho Grain Producers Association meeting with Simpson, "Genesee" Joe Anderson, chairman of the Idaho commission, said there could be a "softening" on Simpson's part.

One of the big things Simpson wants is a 35-year moratorium on dam litigation pertaining to migrating fish, but Anderson said he doesn't think environmentalists will agree to that.

"I think it's supposed to be a legacy for him, but it's not gaining traction," Anderson said.

However, Simpson is on the House Appropriations Committee, and the wheat leaders expressed concern that he could insert funding into the pending infrastructure bill and then come up



Capital Press graphic

with an agreement.

"None of us know what this Simpson deal will morph into," said Mike Carstensen, grain commission chairman and a Lincoln County, Wash., farmer. "Something will happen, but the endgame for all of us, I believe, will be when it really goes

after transportation.

Once the dams are out, the balance shifts from river navigation to rail, Carstensen said.

"You don't have to be a river user, you don't have to be in the Lewiston pool to have your transportation affected by having those

dams coming out," he said.

River navigation advocates say rail and trucks are not economically or environmentally sustainable alternatives to barging wheat and supplies on that part of the river.

"Grain doesn't have a great track record of coming out on top in rail issues when there's high-priced petroleum wanting to run down the tracks — and corn and soybeans," Anderson said.

The agriculture industry will continue to promote the environmental and economic benefits of the river system for decades to come, Anderson said. In 20 or 30 years, perhaps technology could make some of the things Simpson wants possible, he says, such as a replacement for the electricity the dams generate.

"There may be hydrogen-powered electric autonomous semis that can run down the river in 20 or 30 years, but they're not there now," Anderson said. "I don't like to even think about agreeing to anything on theoretical or conceptual fixes to a problem."

Squires said the Washington Association of Wheat Growers, the lobbying arm of the state's industry, increased its funding to the Inland Ports and Navigation Group, the legal arm of the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association. He recommended other grower organizations also be aware of the group.

Agriculture stakeholders support the Columbia River System Operations environmental impact statement and NOAA Fisheries' salmon recovery plan.

Southwest Idaho irrigators battle trash, debris dumping

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

Irrigation districts and canal companies in growing southwest Idaho say they're seeing more yard waste, trash and other debris dumped into canals, laterals and ditches as well as onto their legally protected rights of way.

"With the population growth, it's more than ever," Treasure Valley Water Users Association Executive Director Roger Batt said. "People think these places are waste-disposal sites."

The valley's irrigation delivery entities operate about 1,500 miles of canals, laterals and ditches.

Batt said there are more homes near irrigation infrastructure and more residents who are living near it for the first time.

The Community Planning Association of Southwestern Idaho reported that the April 2021



Treasure Valley Water Users Association

Trash is an increasing problem in southwest Idaho irrigation canals and ditches.

population was up by 3.2% in Ada County and 3.6% in Canyon County from a year earlier.

"This year, we have already seen an alarming increase in

household waste being dumped into our irrigation facilities and along our easements," Mark Zirschky, superintendent of Caldwell-based Pioneer Irriga-

tion District, said in a release from the association.

Cleanup-related spending "should not be the burden of our water users," and the dumped

material can harm the system, he said.

For example, a load of tree limbs and stumps dumped at night plugged Pioneer's main spillway on the sizable Phyllis Canal this year. Water rose, and "absent our automation system, we could have lost the canal (function) in the early morning hours," Zirschky said.

Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District Water Superintendent Greg Curtis said the dumping problem grows in step with the population increase.

"If that trash and yard waste stay in the canal, we will have to fight it all the way through the system as pipes and weed racks get clogged," he said.

Batt said debris dumping has been a problem for years. One Idaho statute prohibits it because it can interfere with delivery of irrigation water, and another allows criminal proceedings against violators.

Oregon governor signs bill to explore liability changes for prescribed fire

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon Gov. Kate Brown Monday signed into law House Bill 2571, which could potentially lead to a change in liability standards for prescribed fire.

The new law may help expand the use of prescribed fire in Oregon.

Prescribed fire, also known as "planned," "Rx" or "controlled" fire, is a fire set intentionally to limit hazardous fuels on the landscape — for example, by burning brush under trees in the spring to prevent a larger wildfire in the summer or fall.

House Bill 2571 directs agencies and forest industry leaders to study liability options for prescribed fires. This is important because landowners nationwide cite liability concerns as one of the top reasons they're reluctant to use prescribed fire.

"Stricter liability standards deter people from doing prescribed burns because they're afraid of getting

sued if there's an escape," said Lenya Quinn-Davidson, who directs the Northern California Prescribed Fire Council. "As a burn boss, you take on a lot of personal responsibility."

Liability means the legal responsibility a person holds for their acts or omissions.

The U.S. has three main liability standards for prescribed burning: strict liability, which holds a person responsible for harm even if he wasn't negligent; simple negligence, which holds a person responsible if he didn't take reasonable care; and gross negligence, which holds someone responsible only if he showed reckless disregard for safety.

Most states, including Oregon, have simple negligence standards. Eight use a gross negligence standard.

In states with lower liability standards, people do more prescribed burns. Oregon, for example, a simple negligence state, burned only 200,629 acres in 2019, while Florida, a gross negligence state, burned more than 1

million acres the same year.

To incentivize more prescribed burning on private lands, Oregon is exploring making the shift from simple to gross negligence.

But the law signed Monday won't automatically change Oregon's liability standard. Instead, it'll open the conversation and prompt a study — first steps.

"It's not 100% clear yet if changing the standard will enable more prescribed fire, but we do want to have that conversation," said Jenna Knobloch, administrative coordinator at the Oregon Prescribed Fire Council.

The new law directs the Department of Consumer and Business Services to consult with the state Forestry Department, Oregon Forest and Industries Council, Oregon Small Woodlands Association, Oregon State University, the Oregon Prescribed Fire Council and a representative of the insurance industry to study liability and insurance coverage options for prescribed fires.



Brad Carlson/Capital Press File

Lance Phillips checks his cherry trees on May 15, 2020. This year's crop is looking better as harvest gets underway, he said.

SW Idaho cherries faring better after difficult 2020

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

EMMETT, Idaho — Lance Phillips liked how his Emmett, Idaho, cherry orchards looked on the afternoon of June 10 following substantial rainfall that morning.

"If that had happened a week later, we would be splitting cherries — and almost immediately if the right conditions happen," the Gem Orchards owner-operator said.

The National Weather Service said Boise received 0.71 inch of rain June 10 and had its wettest 24-hour period so far this year.

Phillips said the worst-case scenario for a cherry grower is heavy rain followed immediately by high heat and a lack of wind. A cherry that is heat-stressed and wet can split its skin and lose moisture, quality and storage life.

"Today, here it was cool enough and breezy enough for long enough" following the rain that lasted most of the morning, he said. "The cherries aren't going to split."

Idaho Cherry Commission Chairman Sally Symms said she expects production in the state to be about 40% higher than last year, when heavy frost in late spring damaged much of the crop.

At Symms Fruit Ranch,

between Caldwell and Marsing, the cherry crop held up well during a freeze this April, she said. Harvest started there June 14.

Idaho is among the top five U.S. producers of sweet cherries, according to the state Department of Agriculture.

Phillips said his orchard is producing 50-60% of what it would if not for frost damage in early April.

"This year, we probably lost 35-40% in total weight" due to frost, he said. "We hope we make up for it in size of fruit to recover some of the loss in cherries. It's Mother Nature's thinning."

Phillips said frost damage this year varied among Emmett producers, based on the location and orientation of their trees, the slope of the hillside and frost-management practices.

Since early April, "conditions have been a little cooler than normal, but there has been no rain or hail through the area that can really mark and damage fruit," he said.

Phillips said his crop is in much better shape than it was last year, when output was 5% of normal following a late, heavy frost.

Gem and other cherry producers offer a mix of varieties that mature at different times, which can extend the public "U-pick" season.

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