

Water: ‘It is a drop in the bucket compared to the needs we have’

Continued from Page 1

development grants was replenished with \$30 million.

In light of the huge investments required for water supply development in the state, \$30 million in grants “doesn’t go very far,” Snell said. “It is a drop in the bucket compared to the needs we have.”

However, without the added \$30 million, only \$3 million would have been left remaining in the grant fund, said Racquel Rancier, policy manager for the Oregon Water Resources Department.

“We wouldn’t have been able to provide much assistance after that \$3 million

was allocated,” she said.

Jeff Stone, executive director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries, said the Legislature should clarify that the grants are meant to fund storage projects, such as reservoirs that save winter runoff for irrigation use.

Stone said the grants have mostly gone to conservation projects, which are helpful, but getting serious about climate change will mean extending water resources.

“It’s not doing what we created it to do,” he said.

Lawmakers devoted \$1 million to study the reallocation of water behind 13 federal dams in the Willamette basin.

Though the dams are administered by the federal government, water transfers and wildlife impacts come under the jurisdiction of state regulators.

The money will allow state regulators to study how the transfers should be carried out, which will involve input from irrigators, cities and environmental groups, said Mary Anne Cooper, vice president of public policy for the Oregon Farm Bureau.

The money will hopefully resolve conflicts over water transfers “on the front end,” so farmers don’t have to litigate to protect their interests, she said.

If not for the influx of federal funding, the outlook

would have been gloomy for irrigators, since the state’s Water Resources Department was expected to lay off staff, said Snell.

For various water transactions, “that would result in slower processing times and certainly not an improvement in work,” she said.

The agency was set to lose eight positions — from 178 to 170 — under Gov. Kate Brown’s biennial budget, but lawmakers increased the number to 209 positions due to better-than-expected tax revenues and federal dollars.

“It was great to see the budget turn-around,” Rancier said. “The water issues we’re seeing are incredibly complex and the easy water solutions are gone.”

In sum, the 2021 legislative session moved the state in the right direction toward having a more resilient water system, Stone said. “People finally started talking with one another, not at one another.”

Lawmakers spent \$5 million for planning work and \$11 million for data collection and technology improvements, which natural resources groups say are necessary steps for the future.

About \$2.4 million was specifically allocated to study all 18 major hydrologic basins with new technology that measures evapotranspiration and assistance from the U.S. Geological Survey.

Those studies will allow regulators to better understand groundwater resources across the state, which is meant to prevent over-allocation.

“We need to identify those areas of concern before they get critical,” said Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane. “The current way we’re managing the groundwater resource is not beneficial to anyone.”

Measuring groundwater is more complex than surface water, relying on observation wells that act as “straws” instead of more readily visible stream flows and reservoir levels, he said.

“We’re shooting in the dark, looking through a couple straws,” Owens said.

Parker: ‘Alice is an icon — for all of agriculture’

Continued from Page 1

inches of rainfall a year, was replacing that well water with more plentiful Columbia River water.

But the problem was how to get the water from the river to the farms. Doing that would require both political and financial support.

That’s where Parker came in. She was at the center of those efforts, meeting with policy makers and state and federal lawmakers to cobble together support for building the massive network of pumps and pipes.

“I had so many people tell me back when I was working in those early days, ‘You’ll never live long enough to see any more water out there,’” she said. “They’re wrong. I’m still here.”

Starting out

Parker and her husband, Ike, grew up 9 miles apart in Colorado dryland farm country. Farming was in their blood.

“My oldest sister and his oldest brother were married,” Parker said. “They used to take us places. ... He didn’t want to have anything to do with me and I didn’t want to have anything to do with him. After they got married and left us alone, we just finally started dating and ended up getting married.”

The couple married in 1952. Ike died in January 2002. They have three children, 10 grandchildren and 16 great-grandchildren.

They moved to Royal City, Wash., from Colorado in January 1965.

The Parkers’ farm was part of Block 81, the last irrigation block of the Columbia Basin Project to be developed on the Royal Slope.

Ike’s cousins had already bought several 80- to 200-acre farming or ranching units in Washington, and convinced the couple to make the move to farm full-time.

The soil was so light when they arrived that it could have easily blown away, Parker said.

“Those first three years, we farmed to get that ground tied down, not to make money,” she said.

They developed their 320 acres of sagebrush and cheatgrass, raising field corn, sweet corn, peas, sugar beets, carrot seed, turnip seed, alfalfa, wheat and dry beans.



Alice Parker and Jed Crowther, development coordinator for the East Columbia Basin Irrigation District, in front of irrigation pipe.



Alice Parker in front of the surge tank in the EL47.5 pumping station, the East Columbia Basin Irrigation District’s newest water delivery system.

The Parkers put in their first irrigation system in 1975. Before that, they relied on siphon tubes, wheel lines and corrugated hills dug into the soil.

“Oh, man, if we would have had center pivots back when we first started, it would have been a godsend,” Parker said.

Then and now

When Congress authorized the Columbia Basin Project in 1943, it was designed to deliver water to 1.03 million acres of farmland. Only about 671,000 acres ever received water, about 65% of the total.

In 1964, the Columbia Basin Development League — a group of the region’s business and agricultural leaders — was formed to push for completion of the project.

“They said (it would take) 75 years. I was in hopes we could get it

quicker than that,” Parker said.

In the meantime, in the mid-1970s, the Washington Department of Ecology allowed farmers in the Odessa Subarea to drill irrigation wells to provide water temporarily until another major portion of the project, the East High Canal, could be built.

But that canal, with a price tag of more than \$1 billion, was never built.

Instead, the groundwater pumping continued, and today those wells are running dry.

The first big addition to the system in nearly 50 years is now operating. The East Columbia Basin Irrigation District’s \$20.8 million EL 47.5 station supplies enough Columbia River water to irrigate 8,521 acres that previously depended on deep-well pumping. It began operation last spring and has the capacity to serve

10,500 acres of farmland.

Another development, in the Wahluke Slope near Mattawa, was completed the 1970s, said Jed Crowther, development coordinator of the irrigation district.

Parker believes the entire Columbia Basin Project will eventually be completed.

“But when, who knows?” she said.

Parker says she never lost hope.

“No, I don’t think so,” she said. “Bull-headedness, I guess.”

She recalled a farewell party when she and Ike left Colorado.

“This one guy, he was an old German guy, he said, ‘Ah, I give you six months and you’ll be back,’” she remembered. “And I thought, ‘OK, gotta prove him wrong.’”

Joining the league

In Parker, Development League executive director Chan Bailey found an ally and an effective proponent of the project. He often asked her to testify at legislative hearings in Olympia, partly because she farmed and partly because of her connections to Women Involved in Farm Economics (WIFE).

As WIFE’s national president in 1988-1989, Parker also made numerous trips to Washington, D.C., speaking on behalf of farmers with members of Congress.

She said her husband, Ike, and her parents were prime examples of

farmer advocacy.

“They instilled in me that your surroundings are only as good as you yourself try to help make it be,” she said. “Ike was a great supporter and a great pusher. He kept pushing me, making sure I was free to go and do those kinds of things.”

When Bailey retired as the league’s executive director in 1992, the board asked Parker to step in. The organization installed a second phone line so she could work at home.

She retired in 2012, but remains active in the league.

“They said, ‘No, you’re not going anyplace,’” she remembered. “They didn’t let me go.”

Parker is on the league’s board of trustees and executive committee.

She hopes to step down from the executive committee during the next election, she said, but she’ll continue to work as long as someone is needed.

“When you get to be my age, it’s kind of time to start letting some of the younger people take over,” Parker said.

‘Advocate, partner’

Parker’s many connections with farm organizations and legislators were vital, leaders say.

“She’s the cornerstone of the development league,” said Dale Pomeroy, a retired farmer and commissioner of the Port of Warden. “People went to her from everywhere, asking, ‘How are we going to fix this?’ It was a big puzzle, and she quietly sat there and had a lot of the pieces put together.”

The state and federal agencies involved have all gone through several leadership changes over the decades, Pomeroy said.

“What’s been handed down to them, a lot of it comes from Alice, indirectly as well as directly,” he said.

Parker’s groundwork allowed the agencies to get moving relatively quickly and make early progress, said Derek Sandison, former director of the state Department of Ecology’s Office of the Columbia River and now director of the state Department of Agriculture.

“She’s one of the nicest

people, very genuine, passionate about her beliefs and what she wanted to accomplish,” Sandison said. “She was a tireless advocate for that, but you really enjoyed working with her. That’s a special set of skills, to be both the advocate and the good partner.”

Parker’s status as a lifelong farmer meant people knew she was a straight shooter and could be trusted, said Clark Kagele, an Odessa farmer and secretary of the league.

“Everybody knew Alice,” Kagele said. “You could walk into a room with Alice and the comfort came quicker, immediately. You could sit down and have a real conversation.”

“Alice is an icon — for all of agriculture but certainly for water, irrigation and the Columbia Basin Project,” said Vicky Scharlau, the league’s current executive director. “Her voice continues to be one of the most important and meaningful for the league and for our work. She should be nominated for the State Medal of Merit,” an annual award the governor presents to exceptional Washingtonians.

Persistence pays

From her home atop the Frenchman Hills, Parker can look out across the Royal Slope “and see what everybody’s doing.”

“Which is really enjoyable to me, to see all the new things, new ideas and new ways of farming ... that the farmers are coming up with,” she said.

The benefits of the new pump station in Warden extend beyond the farmers receiving water all the way to the people who will eat the food that those farmers grow, Parker said as she walked around the facility.

“It just amazes me what people can do and what they have done,” she said. “The entire Columbia Basin Project from the get-go, from Grand Coulee all the way down. It’s just beyond comprehension.”

She paused for a moment.

“It really pleases me to see this all happening, under my watch,” she said with a laugh. “I didn’t get it started but I worked on it.”

Survey: ‘Now that the price is high, do we want to keep planting and planting?’

Continued from Page 1

Nearly one-third of all U.S. Christmas trees come from Oregon. Most trees are grown in the Willamette Valley, particularly Clackamas and Marion counties.

Higher prices are great for growers, Grogan said, but the industry must be careful not to make trees so expensive that consumers opt for artificial ones instead.

After a five-year hiatus, Grogan is pushing the industry to conduct the survey every other year. The goal is to provide information that allows farms to make better planting decisions, and even out the industry’s boom-and-

bust cycles.

“We can give the consumer a more consistent price, season to season,” Grogan said.

The most recent oversupply peaked around the time of the Great Recession in 2009-10, Grogan said. Then there were 1,633 farms growing Christmas trees in Oregon. Five years later, that number had plummeted by more than half.

“We were selling trees for less than the cost of production. As a result, we lost at least half of the growers in the Northwest,” Grogan said. “The ones that did stay in, they significantly reduced their acres. They couldn’t put



Christmas trees climb a hillside along the eastern rim of the Willamette Valley.

the trees in like they used to.”

Now, plantings are inching back up as the industry has corrected itself. In 2016,

growers planted approximately 4.2 million trees. In 2020, they planted 6.1 million trees.

“That’s what we want to keep an eye on,” Grogan said. “Now that the price is high, do we want to keep planting and planting? I’m really trying to get people to take a look at what we’ve done in the past, and not make the same mistakes.”

According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, growers expected to plant 5.83 million trees in 2021. It takes 6-10 years for new seedlings to reach maturity, depending on variety.

Extreme heat and drought is also expected to take a toll on this year’s crop, especially the younger trees, Grogan said.

“It was challenging for us, to say the least,” he said, referring to the “heat dome” that enveloped the Northwest earlier this summer. “I think quite a bit of growers are going to be cutting fewer trees than they anticipated.”

That being said, Grogan does not expect there will be a tree shortage come winter.

“Most of the trees are in good shape and there will be plenty of trees for harvest this year,” he said.

It is common, Grogan said, to have mortality in younger seedlings. While he expects the mortality rate will be higher this year, he did not have an immediate estimate.