

Stakeholders ask for review of Reclamation repayment policy

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Stakeholders in the Odessa Subarea are asking the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to review the need for a repayment contract for the cost of work the agency has done on the irrigation project.

They also hope to convince Congress to fund more of the work without requiring repayment.

Roughly 100 farms have declining wells in the Odessa Subarea. Farmers and stakeholders want to replace well water with Columbia River water.

"The Odessa program is not what was anticipated in construction of the Columbia Basin Project," said Mike Schwisow, director of government relations for the Columbia Basin Development League. "It instead is a public interest effort to conserve groundwater for other uses...."

The Odessa program is limited to acre-for-acre groundwater



Mike Schwisow

replacement, and not an expansion to include more irrigated ground, Schwisow said. All three Columbia Basin irrigation districts have repayment contracts for farm blocks. But the land in Odessa was never platted in farm blocks because Reclamation's construction of the irrigation works was never completed. As a result, there is no repayment contract for the portion of East Columbia Basin Irrigation District's contract covering that land.

Reclamation consistently tells Congress that capital construction can't be funded because there's no repayment contract to recover the federal investment, Schwisow said.

Odessa lands to be served by the pump station-pipeline distribution systems would instead be served

in the future by construction of the East High Canal system, originally included when the Columbia Basin Project was authorized by Congress in 1943, but was never built.

"In effect, the landowners would have to repay for two systems, which is patently unfair," Schwisow said.

Reclamation funds other public interest programs without requiring repayment contracts, Schwisow said.

"We've asked for a long time, and the president's budget has never included anything for Odessa, other than continuation of funding for oversight activities," he said. "It hasn't been nothing, but it hasn't been major construction dollars."

Last year, federal funding for oversight increased to \$2 million. The president's budget included \$1.5 million, and \$500,000 was added through earmarks.

The league estimates completion of Odessa groundwater

replacement will cost over \$266 million, plus \$42 million to replace 10 bridges.

Washington state has already contributed \$126 million and East Columbia Basin Irrigation District (ECBID) has invested \$16.68 million in bond sales.

Schwisow doesn't have an estimate of the total amount farmers would have to repay. It's constantly shifting, he said, pointing to state funding and the inclusion of the project for USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service watershed planning program, which is grant funding for up to 75% of construction costs in some areas.

"Whatever we can get through grant funding reduces what landowner repayment would be for the irrigation district having to go to the bond market," Schwisow said. "We think we have a good argument. Given the nature of the Odessa program, this is not standard Reclamation irrigation devel-

opment. It is a public interest, temporary solution."

Schwisow said the request for review doesn't delay any current work.

"What we're looking for with this is just to open more opportunities," he said.

Schwisow hopes to hear back from Reclamation this year.

Reclamation has already reviewed the project under a repayment criteria standard, said Marc Maynard, field office manager for the bureau in Ephrata, Wash.

Congress has the ability to give Reclamation the authority to fund the project without repayment but has not done so, Maynard said.

"My understanding is Congress is not contemplating this, but certainly that's something the user-groups could lobby for, should they choose to," he said.

Reclamation will continue to work with the irrigation districts and state on Odessa groundwater replacement, Maynard said.

Owyhee Irrigation District to receive \$1.3 million from USDA

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press



Clancy Flynn

The Owyhee Irrigation District will receive about \$1.3 million from USDA as part of the new federal infrastructure package, district general manager Clancy Flynn says.

USDA last month announced it will invest \$420 million in 132 infrastructure projects in 31 states. The work includes rehabilitating dams, preventing flooding and restoring watersheds. The agency said the funding aims to build on a \$166 million investment announced earlier this year.

For Oregon, \$2.7 million targets modernization projects in the Tumalo, Owyhee and East Fork irrigation districts.

USDA said modernization work "provides a climate-resilient solution to offset the impacts of drought throughout the regions of the Deschutes River, Tumalo Creek, Snake River and Hood River watersheds." The Owyhee River is a Snake River tributary.

The agency said open irrigation canals will be con-

verted to pipelines to deliver water more efficiently and "preserve water where it is needed to restore critical habitat for designated trout and salmon species."

Pipelines reduce loss from evaporation and seepage, divert less water from rivers and increase flow downstream.

Flynn said May 4 that his Nyssa, Ore.-based irrigation district is yet to sign an agreement for the new funding. The district will use the money to hire a contractor and start a watershed planning process, which will include public and stakeholder input.

The district board still must approve a contract with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, he said. After it receives the funding, the board will issue a request for proposals from contractors to develop the watershed plan.

The plan will look at the district's system improve-

ments plan in the context of watershed impacts. Flynn said the process could start this year.

He said the watershed plan positions the district to apply for more federal funding, such as through the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act. That law authorizes NRCS to help organizations plan and carry out various projects, including water supply development.

"We would be able to accomplish projects that could take decades in a matter of years with these bigger dollars," Flynn said.

The district last year completed its system improvements plan. It calls for piping canals and laterals, in part to save water and energy.

Flynn said much of the piping completed so far aims to pressurize water delivery, particularly where a drop in elevation reduces the need to use electric pumps for sprinkler irrigation.

He said that if the district gets more money it could take on other work such as piping flatter laterals to save water.



A Douglas fir beetle.

USFS

More bark beetle activity expected in forests this year

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Drought last year means more bark beetle activity this year.

More tree mortalities are expected due to Western pine beetles, Douglas fir beetles and pine engraver beetles.

"It stems from a lot of our forests being overstocked to begin with, which leads to moisture stress among trees," said Chris Schnepf, University of Idaho Extension forestry educator. "Drought certainly exacerbates that, and the beetles are just taking advantage of that."

Many Douglas fir trees fell during the winter of 2020-2021, making easy pickings for beetles. Douglas fir beetles are also attacking standing groups of trees, Schnepf said.

Root diseases make trees more likely to fall in winter storms, Schnepf said. Fallen Douglas firs create a breeding ground for the beetles.

Pine engraver beetles tend to attack smaller trees. Roughly 90% of beetles breeding in forest slash, or debris, are pine engraver beetles, Schnepf said.

"Historically, we have had two generations per year in North Idaho," he said. "In recent years, increasingly, we're seeing three generations a year because of the longer growing season."

All the beetles are native to the region.

"When conditions are right, their populations can explode and you start seeing more tree mortality," Schnepf said.

He's seeing the worst pine beetle activity in stands south of Coeur d'Alene. He expects more Douglas fir beetle activity in spring and summer throughout the Idaho panhandle.

Moisture can strengthen the trees against the beetles. Rain, cooler conditions and longer snow periods are positives this year, Schnepf said.

"But it depends — last year we had a really good snowpack in the winter, but then the faucet just got turned off in the first part of the summer," he said. "We didn't get any precip until fall."

However, when beetle populations are high, the insect pests can attack forests even in relatively moist conditions, especially if

trees are overstocked.

Schnepf recommends forest owners monitor their land to see if they are developing any problems. They should reduce density, favoring the best trees for a given site.

"Sometimes people think, 'Well, I had pines killed by bark beetles, maybe I should grow other species,'" Schnepf said. "That's generally not a good approach. Sites where we have the most moisture stress tend to be the drier sites, and ultimately, pine are the best adapted species to those lower-elevation drier sites."

Forest owners doing work this year should not leave green stemwood bigger than 3 inches in diameter out, which would feed additional beetle activity, he said.

UI Extension hosts a "Bark Beetle and Root Disease Field Day" June 10 in Coeur d'Alene. Pre-register by June 3. A \$15 registration fee covers handouts and refreshments.

For registration questions, contact the University of Idaho Extension Office in Kootenai County at (208) 292-2525.

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Wet April gives Yakima irrigators full water supply

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

Yakima River Basin irrigators with junior rights will receive full water allotments between now and the end of September, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation predicted May 4.

The south-central Washington irrigators were facing slight cutbacks a month ago. An unusual amount of spring rain and snow erased the deficit, bureau river operations engineer Chris Lynch said.

"Precipitation came on like gangbusters in April," he said.

The bureau manages five reservoirs that hold water to

irrigate some 464,000 acres. Senior water-right holders receive full allotments, while junior water-right holders are cut back in water-short years.

In early April, the bureau predicted junior water-right holders would get 94% of their normal supplies.

Rain at the reservoirs was heavy in April — 161% of normal. The reservoirs are holding more water than usual for this time of year and are expected to fill up.

The snowpacks that melt into the reservoirs were below normal on April 1, but are above average now.

"Late snow should help with irrigation later on," bureau hydrologist Mik Lewicki said.