

Water: ‘The Bureau continues to target our small district for their failure’

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“Fundamentally, KDD’s refusal to follow Reclamation’s plans impedes Reclamation’s ability to operate the Project,” the lawsuit states.

Scott White, KDD executive director, said the district is doing nothing wrong. In addition to its federal Project water right, White

said KDD has a supplemental water right with the state of Oregon dating back to 1977 that it exercises when Project water is in short supply.

“The Bureau has literally acknowledged and affirmed KDD’s water rights in the past and encouraged us to exercise them when there is no Project supply available,” White said. “It’s incredible

that they claim we are in breach of contract for doing the very thing they asked of us for years.”

KDD serves approximately 27,000 acres, with 22,000 acres of private land and 5,000 acres of public ground that includes part of the Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge.

Water for KDD is delivered from the Klamath

River below Upper Klamath Lake via the Ady and North canals. Unlike other districts in the Project, White said KDD owns all of its own infrastructure, apart from the headgates of the Ady Canal.

“From our perspective, this isn’t a contract issue. It’s a water rights issue,” White said.

White said Reclamation has also denied KDD land-

owners from receiving federal funding through the Klamath Project Drought Response Agency that would partially compensate farmers for not irrigating. The agency had allocated \$20 million for the program in 2022.

“The Bureau continues to target our small district for their failure at managing the Project,” he said. “We

do so much good for the refuge, the fish, recirculation of our water and preservation of our lands and wildlife, but none of that matters, I guess.”

Mary Lee Knecht, a spokeswoman for Reclamation, declined to comment, citing pending litigation. “We will reach out when we have an update to share,” Knecht said.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Nicole Berg, president of the National Association of Wheat Growers, inspects a field of irrigated wheat near Paterson, Wash.

Berg: Safety net doesn’t necessarily cover high input costs

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protecting crop insurance to ensure wheat growers have a strong and reliable safety net, supporting the financial and technical assistance provided through voluntary conservation programs and enhancing USDA’s market access programs.

Berg has long aspired to be a part of shaping a new farm bill. This year she will be shuttling to Washington, D.C., as Congress pieces together the legislation that will serve as a roadmap for U.S. agriculture and the USDA.

She spoke with the Capital Press the morning of May 13 in her office on the farm in Paterson. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Capital Press: You’ve mentioned that, with Rhonda Larson of East Grand Forks, Minn., taking over as president of U.S. Wheat Associates, it will be one of the first times women lead both national wheat organizations. What opportunities does that present for the industry?

Berg: This administration and Congress are very minority-oriented with their approach. So I think that’s created an opportunity for us.

For the industry itself, I think it might mean we take a little bit different approach to matters. You know, women like to communicate (laughs).

I don’t know. I’ve never really thought of myself as a woman in ag, I’m just a person in ag.

What made you decide to get involved in the national leadership of NAWG?

Berg: I’ve always wanted to be a part of a farm bill, knowing that it is so important to U.S. agriculture and how it keeps family farms in business.

I wanted to be part of that, to make sure it is keeping family farms in business and it is working for the farmer across the U.S., and if it’s going to work in the Pacific Northwest, the Midwest and East Coast.

What are you most hoping to see in the next farm bill?

Berg: I want to see that the safety net that the U.S. creates doesn’t have gaping holes in it ... so it can catch us farmers.

When we’re price-takers in the wheat industry, we can’t pass on those input costs.

The safety net doesn’t necessarily cover high input costs. It covers yield, weather and adverse conditions. It does that pretty good. It also covers price, in some aspects.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Berg is known for her quick wit.

But it doesn’t necessarily come down to the nuts and bolts of the cost of actually farming.

So in a situation like this year — thank God for the rain, we are just like “Thank you, thank you, thank you” — we will grow a crop, probably with these high prices.

The first thing I’ve always told everybody: You’ve got to grow the crop first. Last year, (because of the drought) we didn’t harvest two-thirds of the farm.

It’ll be fun this year. We’re definitely growing wheat, and that also means we might make some money this year.

What role does crop insurance play for you and your family?

Berg: Crop insurance is our biggest risk management tool that we have, especially in the driest area in the world that grows cereal grains and the unpredictability of the weather in our area. It’s kept our family farm in business.

I definitely knew I needed to jump into that risk management tool and have a full understanding of it, as well as make sure the rules and regulations fit into the box to make sure farmers are covered in those times of need. It’s never fun when you can’t harvest your crop.

Farmers are eternal optimists and we always think, “Well, there’s always next year.” And there is. There’s always next year.

You emphasize the importance of farmers telling their stories. Is there a bottleneck? If so, where is it?

Berg: Historically, we’re farmers and we don’t necessarily want to get off the farm. It’s so important that us farmers go to Congress, go to Olympia, go to your state capitol and tell your story. Otherwise, there’s a saying: If you don’t come to the table, you’ll be on the menu.

I definitely, truly believe you’ve got to get off the farm and tell your story. But it’s comfortable to be at home and on the farm. That’s the fun part of the job, is the farming part. The political part, I don’t necessarily have too much of a problem with it. But not all farmers are like that.

Do the lawmakers listen?

Berg: I definitely think the lawmakers listen to farmers. Everybody has to eat. Since everybody has to eat, they’re like, “OK, how do we make safe, healthy nutritious food for the world?” That’s the part I like the most, telling that part of the story. The moment my food is not safe or healthy, I’ll have to turn in my keys, because we do everything we can to make sure our food is safe and healthy.

What is the biggest need in the industry right now?

Berg: To open more markets, make markets the No. 1 priority across the world. With the Russia-Ukraine situation, food aid is an opportunity as well, for us farmers to help out countries in need. I remember when I went on a trip to the refugee camp in Africa (in 2019). It was pretty crazy to see those big bags of U.S. wheat there. It made you proud. That’s some-

thing that’s part of the story that we probably don’t tell enough, that the wheat industry does participate in and supports food aid.

What are you most hoping for from the Biden administration? What are you most likely to actually get?

Berg: That they continue to listen to us farmers, and help us in these times of need. With these high input costs, whether it’s fuel that you feel at the pump — we feel it too, with a tractor — whether it’s the fertilizer prices doubling and tripling; crop protection products doubling and tripling. ... For instance, Round-Up, RT 3, (we) used to pay \$15 per gallon. I just got a bill yesterday for \$46.30 per gallon. ... I almost fell off my chair. ...

What has you most excited?

Berg: I’m most excited about fulfilling a dream of doing the farm bill. It gets me emotional because I worked so hard to get there, and now you’re there, and so now you’re kind of like, “Wow, I finally did it.”

I went through the 2018 Farm Bill, that process, and I was very involved in that from a state level, because of state president stuff (as president of the Washington Association of Wheat Growers). And now being (NAWG) president, with the hearings coming up, the strategy and being part of that executive team, and the great staff we have in D.C., it really is exciting to see, just the strategy of trying to work Congress and tell your story. It’s fun, it’s very fun.

When we talked after your first House agriculture subcommittee hearing, you said you would be willing to help future leaders, and anyone could reach out to you. Have you heard from anyone?

Berg: Oh yeah, everyone’s been reaching out. It’s been great. ... Everybody wants to work policy. We know the importance of the farm bill.

Any advice for a farm kid who’s reading this and wants to be an ag leader?

Berg: My advice to kids coming up is if they want to ever step into this role it is to do 4-H and FFA. Those are important aspects of things that I did. I was on the Parliamentary Procedure team for FFA, and you will utilize that skill the rest of your life, if you want to go into politics or board member work. Your Robert’s Rules of Order comes in very handy.

Also, just work hard. I have a really big work ethic. You might get an email from me at 10 p.m. or

6 a.m. Work hard, work the policy. You’ll hear a lot of noise when you work in an association or on a board, and you have to try to filter through some of the noise and figure out, “What’s really noise? What’s really going on here?” That’s important, to keep your head down and work hard.

Anything else?

Berg: A mission this year is the idea of, what can wheat be used for? ... Are there other value-added things we could do for the wheat industry?

This administration and USDA Secretary (Tom) Vilsack ... would like to create these avenues, like durum wheat, for instance, and the specialty of pasta and where it’s grown. Why are we sending wheat overseas? Instead of sending the wheat or the flour, why don’t we send the pasta? Why can’t we create these areas of industry around farming areas, so we can be U.S. made?

Which I think is a great initiative for the secretary to go for. It creates jobs, it keeps everything in the United States and you know exactly where your products are sourced from. It’s a great vision he has.

I would also like to see the wheat industry pursue the domestic market a little bit more. We do a lot with U.S. Wheat and overseas, but I sometimes feel the domestic market could use a little bit more attention: How are we distributing our wheat domestically, how can we (bring) more value-added to it?

What does farming mean to you?

Berg: It’s a way of life. ... It gets in your blood and through your soul. It’s just kind of there, and you try to do the best you can each year to keep the family farm afloat.

What’s your favorite part?

Berg: I really like the policy side of it, I like the farm bill side, I like trying to tell the story. I don’t know, maybe because I talk too much. But I like to go out and tell the story to people, whether it’s sitting on the airplane next to somebody who says, “Oh, you’re a farmer,” and you start getting these questions, and being able to answer.

Some of the questions from some of these folks from the city, they just don’t understand, and we’ve got to get out there and tell that story to the urban people ... because it’s so important.

People need to understand where their food comes from, and I have no problem with that. They need to come out on the farm, kick some dirt. They can drive combine, even, if they want.