

Conversation with Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Camille Touton

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN
Capital Press

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Camille Touton, who leads the federal agency that oversees water management in 17 Western states, traveled last week through Oregon and California, visiting projects and meeting with concerned communities.

Touton started her week in the Klamath Basin and ended it near the California-Mexico border. Thursday, she sat down for an exclusive virtual interview with the Capital Press.

The conversation centered on a major theme: The West likely isn't getting any more water, so what is Reclamation's plan for better managing the water the region does get?

Klamath Basin

The Klamath Basin, straddling Oregon and California, is a center of conflict where farmers and ranchers compete with tribes and fish managers for scarce water during the ongoing drought.

Reclamation manages the Klamath Project under its interim operations plan, a formula that determines how much water to allocate to irrigators versus other uses. The plan is a stand-in until Biological Opinions dictating project operations are updated, which happens about every five years. Critics say the timeline makes the plan unworkable.

The current interim plan is set to expire Sept. 30. Many farmers, ranchers and tribal members are urging Reclamation not to extend the interim operations plan and instead to do annual consultations to determine allocations, which they say would be more flexible and based on current conditions.

The Capital Press asked Touton if she will consider granting



Camille Touton, center, the commissioner of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, during a tour of the Klamath Basin.

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation



Interior Department officials tour the Klamath Basin during a visit June 27-28.

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

this request. The commissioner declined to give a definite yes or no, but she didn't rule out the option.

"I would just say we're having a conversation on a lot of fronts, including, you know, what a year operation (annual consultations)

would look like," said Touton.

Asked whether she sees the Klamath Project as sustainable with its current model and scale, Touton said, "I don't want to speculate on that."

So, what is Touton's game plan for the Klamath Basin? The commissioner said which tools her agency uses in the basin will depend on which tools local partners — including irrigation districts and tribes — welcome.

She said potential tools, funded in part by the bipartisan infrastructure act Congress passed last year, could include repairs to aging infrastructure, conservation efficiencies and new piping.

Modernization

Some irrigation districts are interested in modernizing their systems, including replacing open

canals with high-density polyethylene piping, which loses less water to evaporation.

The Capital Press asked Touton if she supports piping and similar modernization. Her answer was yes, but she added the caveat that what's right for a particular community or geographic region varies and is not solely Reclamation's decision.

"Some tools that work in the Klamath won't work in Yakima or won't work for the Imperial Valley," said Touton. "That's why I'm traversing (the West), to just really firsthand see what our partners are seeing, listen to them and then use the tools (Reclamation has) to say, 'This is what's right for you.' You want to pressurize? Great. Let's use this program that I have. ... It's really a conversation about what works for them, not Reclamation just saying, 'This is what we're going to do.'"

Storage projects

In the past 18 months, Reclamation has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in new water storage across the West — for example, by raising dams.

Some regions, however, have no new storage projects on the horizon. For example, Oregon doesn't have any storage projects planned with Reclamation. The Capital Press asked Touton why not.

"I think it goes back to what we talked about: what makes sense for what community and what they want," said Touton.

Reclamation's recent storage investments, she said, have largely been in California, where she said partners are prioritizing storage as a need.

Touton said she plans to continue touring the West to better understand which tools and infrastructure best suit specific communities.



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Oregon's outstanding FFA teacher honored

Corvallis, Ore. — Over 170 teachers attended the Oregon Agriculture Teachers Association (OATA) Summer Conference at North Marion High School June 21-23. OATA advocates for agricultural education, provides professional development for agricultural educators, and works to recruit and retain agricultural educators in the profession.

The professional development event concludes with an awards program, when teachers are recognized for their outstanding accomplishments. Selected by a committee of peers from across the state, this year's Outstanding Teacher Award was presented to Stephanie Schofield, Enterprise High School.

"This year's outstanding teacher truly exemplifies what we all strive to be. She believes every student deserves to engage in a safe learning environment where growth and the development of a strong work ethic is achievable and expected," said Kathy Mayfield of North Clackamas High School and current president of the OATA.

Schofield engages 86% of the school's student body in a variety of ag courses including animal and plant sciences, welding and metal fabrication, natural resources, construction, small engines and horticulture. Her curriculum provides rigor and relevance that allows students to cross over into many different pathways.

She has developed strong partnerships with her community and other ag teachers. In a decade of declining enrollment and funding, she expanded educational opportunities in her program and increased enrollment. Schofield also developed outside funding sources and a network of alumni and community partners to continue to develop opportunities for her students.

Her passion for the profession has been evident in her commitment to OATA, recently serving as a state-level officer. You will often find her leading workshops and mentoring other teachers in a variety of disciplines.

Also awarded this year was Jaimee Brentano of Bend as Outstanding Early Career Teacher, JD Cant of Imbler as Outstanding Teacher Mentor, and the program of the year was Pine Eagle FFA.

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Stephanie Schofield, left, receives this year's Outstanding Teacher Award from Jared Collins, the Yamhill-Carlton FFA advisor.



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