

People & Places

# Washington irrigation district leader promotes alternative to water wars

By DON JENKINS  
Capital Press

ELLENSBURG, Wash. — Kittitas Reclamation District manager Urban Eberhart promotes the Yakima River Basin water plan like a man who's seen the futility of water wars.

The basin covers 6,000 square miles in south-central Washington and in one year yields crops worth \$4.5 billion. The basin has 48 fish species, including two that are federally protected.

Once upon a time, Eberhart recalls, seasoned adversaries, equally matched, fought like crazy over water.

Sides lawyered up and stopped talking. "The legal folks were always afraid we might say something wrong," he said.

Nevertheless, people did start talking in a "collaborative process," the opposite of fighting words.

From the talks sprang a 30-year, \$4 billion plan supported by irrigation districts, the Yakama Nation, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the Washington Department of Ecology.

The plan has several elements: conserving and storing water, removing fish barriers and restoring habitat, improving irrigation equipment and operations, and water banking.

The timeline and dollar estimates are rough. The plan has been underway for more than a decade and has decades to go and depends on public funding, primarily from the federal government.

At the request of state legislators, Washington State University in 2014 analyzed the costs and benefits of each project. As insurance against drought, the irrigation projects didn't pencil out, the report concluded.

The plan's backers, includ-



Kittitas Reclamation District manager Urban Eberhart beside a newly lined irrigation canal in Central Washington. Lining canals will conserve water, an element of the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan.

Don Jenkins/Capital Press

ing Ecology, said the plan can't be picked apart that way. Each element depends on the other. If one is short-changed, the enterprise collapses.

It should be a model for others, says Eberhart.

"What we are doing in this basin can be, and I predict will be, replicated in other parts of the United States and arguably the world," he said in a 2020 TED Talk in Yakima.

Eberhart, 61, was a high schooler growing up on the family farm during the severe 1977 drought that intensified the basin's battle over water.

His father, Dee Eberhart, who died this year at the age of 97, was an orchardist and a geography professor at Central Washington University. He testified in Olympia that year on the basin's water shortage.

"My introduction to the legislative process was watching my dad," Eberhart said.

To pre-empt a federal lawsuit over tribal water rights, the Washington Department of Ecology filed for adjudica-

tion in Yakima County Superior Court in 1977. Adjudication prioritizes water rights.

Ecology's director said adjudication might go on for seven to 10 years. Last year, the state Supreme Court ruled on a few final disputes, completing adjudication in 44 years.

Long before then, it was apparent adjudication wasn't going to keep the basin from suffering water shortages, especially if snowpacks are smaller and melt earlier, Eberhart said.

"Adjudication just tells you what you have. It doesn't solve emerging problems in a rapidly changing climate," he said.

With the Yakima adjudication done, Ecology plans to adjudicate water rights in the Nooksack Basin in northwest Washington.

Adjudication will set water rights for the Lummi Nation and Nooksack Indian Tribe, according to Ecology. Beginning next year, the department will take water users to court.

Lawmakers granted Ecol-

ogy's request for money to begin adjudication. They also gave Whatcom County money to hire ex-Ecology directors Jay Manning and Maia Bellon to lead separate, collaborative talks.

"The model that we're proposing to copy is the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan," Manning said last spring. "It is balanced and is designed to achieve the interests of all in the basin."

"We think it's entirely replicable here in the Nooksack Basin," he said.

The effort floundered, or at least stalled for this year, because tribes objected to water-users meeting until Ecology files for adjudication.

Eberhart said he doesn't have a comment on adjudication in the Nooksack, other than he endorses what Manning and Bellon are trying to do.

"I do support them in their attempt to at least see if it's possible," he said.

The Kittitas Reclamation District serves irrigators in the Upper Yakima River Basin.

**Western Innovator**

Urban Eberhart  
Age: 61  
Position: Kittitas Reclamation District manager since 2015; reclamation district board member 1986 to 2015; farmer and irrigator  
Education: Attended Central Washington University

The district has a goal of conserving 100,118 acre-feet through projects that will cost a total of \$387 million. "I'm very confident it is possible in the reasonable future," Eberhart said.

So far, the district has conserved 6,843 acre-feet. Cottonwood trees that flourished beside earthen canals are drying up now that the canals are lined with fabric and concrete.

The irrigation district and other agencies also rerouted water to keep fish-bearing Manastash Creek flowing year-round instead of going dry in the summer. "We achieved, I think, more than anyone thought we could," Kittitas County Conservation District project manager Sherry Swanson said.

Standing beside flowing Manastash Creek, Eberhart said the project was a creative alternative to being sued.

"Before the collaborative process, this would be dry and embroiled in lawsuits," he said. "We can be creative if we aren't in litigation. With litigation we crawl back in our bunkers."

## Douglas County Livestock Association helps young ranchers get started

By CRAIG REED  
For the Capital Press

ROSEBURG, Ore. — The Douglas County Livestock Association's Heifer Replacement Program is in its 10th year of helping young people get started in the cattle business.

The purpose of the program is to not only present 4-H and FFA kids with heifers, but to encourage them to continue in the cattle business and in agriculture.

"We want to give these young people a jumpstart in the business," said Veril Nelson who owns Nelson's Red Angus Ranch east of Sutherlin, Ore., and who helped establish the heifer program. "The livestock association recognizes the value of educating kids about agriculture. The best way to go about that is to have an agricultural project. Giving kids this experience bridges that gap to agriculture and might inspire them to be involved in agriculture in their future."

Nelson said not every kid who received a heifer over the past 10 years has worked to build a herd, but overall "the program has been successful and the experiences have been good for



Molly Kenagy of Oakland, Ore., with the cow she received as a heifer in 2019 from the Douglas County Livestock Association. The cow has had two calves.

Craig Reed/For the Capital Press

the kids."

The program has provided an average of two heifers per year to kids in the county. About 15 livestock producers have provided the heifers. The producers are reimbursed 80% of the animal's value by the livestock association and they donate the other 20%. The heifers are valued at about \$1,000.

Nelson said it hasn't been difficult to get a couple producers to donate one of their heifers each year.

Kids grades 5 through 11 are eligible to apply for a heifer if they have previously shown a livestock ani-

mal in at least one jackpot show or fair, have a suitable location to keep the heifer and can provide feed for it.

Cyrus Holcomb of Elkton, Ore., and Tyler Ring of Roseburg were two of the first kids to receive heifers. Holcomb was 13 when he received a heifer from Nelson's herd in 2011.

Ring was also 13 when he got his heifer from ranchers Brian and Cheryl Arp of Days Creek, Ore.

Both Holcomb and Ring still have their respective heifers who became mother cows. Holcomb's cow had its 10th calf this spring. That

cow's first calf was a heifer and it had its eighth calf this spring.

Several of Holcomb's and Ring's heifers haven't been sold, but have been kept and have become mothers, helping to slowly expand each herd.

Holcomb and Ring are now 23 and are fully involved in ranching.

"The biggest thing I took away from the heifer program was the responsibility you have for your animals and for stewardship of the land," said Holcomb, who is now partners with his father, Roger Holcomb, in the cattle business. "The program taught me some skills and gave me the encouragement to take this career path."

Ring said his livestock goal is to raise good commercial cattle and to sell a few show steers back into the community to 4-H and FFA kids, helping them to have the same livestock experiences he had as a teenager.

Paige Edmonson of Sutherlin was selected to receive a heifer from rancher Linda Sherman of Canyonville, Ore., in 2019. That heifer gave birth to a heifer calf and the latter animal has given birth to two heif-

ers, expanding Edmonson's small herd.

Molly Kenagy of Oakland, Ore., also received a heifer in 2019. Her animal came from the Nelson ranch. Her heifer has had two calves, a bull and a heifer.

Ring said he appreciates the livestock owners donating heifers with "good genetics."

"The heifer I got was extremely well built and has been a good mother," he said. "I wouldn't be able to do this without the producers donating some of their profit."

Edmonson said the heifer program has taught her all about the work that goes into building a herd, including tracing gestation periods and studying such subjects as genetics and nutrition.

Kenagy said it was a privilege to be selected for a heifer.

"It's a great opportunity," she said. "These ranchers want to help you, they want to help you become involved in the livestock industry."

Holcomb said it's great to walk out his front door and "to know this land and these animals are your responsibility. It's all on you. It's an achievement that's been fun for me."

### CALENDAR

Submit upcoming ag-related events on [www.capitalpress.com](http://www.capitalpress.com) or by email to [newsroom@capitalpress.com](mailto:newsroom@capitalpress.com). All times reflect the local time zone unless otherwise noted.

#### SATURDAY-SUNDAY AUG. 6-7

**Great Oregon Steam-Up:** 7 a.m.-6 p.m., Powerland Heritage Park, 3995 Brooklake Road NE, Brooks, Ore. Enjoy a steam-powered day with train and trolley rides, a parade, steam sawmilling, traditional tractor pulling, machinery demos, threshing, flour milling, fire apparatus demos, museum tours, kids pedal tractor pulling and a youth passport program. Website: [www.antiq-uepowerland.com/steam-up](http://www.antiq-uepowerland.com/steam-up) Phone: 503-393-2424

#### MONDAY AUG. 8

**Transitioning Your Ag Business to the Next Chapter:** 12:30-4 p.m. Paisley Community Center, 705 Chewaucan St., Paisley, Ore. Farm and Ranch succession counselor and accountant Diana Tourney will prepare you for the human and financial elements of succession planning. Easement specialist Marc Hudson will answer your questions about working lands conservation easements — what they are, what they aren't, and how they may be helpful in executing your agricultural business plans. These in-person events are part of a free 6-workshop series in Lake, Harney and Malheur counties. All are welcome, and the events are free. RSVP for these or any of OAT's other events and refer any questions about the event to [diane@oregonagtrust.org](mailto:diane@oregonagtrust.org) 503-858-2683

#### TUESDAY AUG. 9

**Transitioning Your Ag Business to the Next Chapter:** 12:30-4 p.m. Lake County Library, 26 South G St., Lakeview, Ore. Farm and Ranch succession counselor and accountant Diana Tourney will prepare you for the human and financial elements of succession planning. Easement specialist Marc Hudson will answer your questions about working lands conservation easements — what they are, what they aren't, and how they may be helpful in executing your agricultural business plans. These in-person events are part of a free 6-workshop series in Lake, Harney and Malheur counties. All are welcome, and the events are free. RSVP for these or any of OAT's other events and refer any questions about the event to [diane@oregonagtrust.org](mailto:diane@oregonagtrust.org) 503-858-2683

#### MONDAY-TUESDAY AUG. 8-9

**American Lamb Summit:** Michigan State University and East Lansing Marriott East Lansing, Mich. The summit will focus on competitiveness, production and quality of American lamb. Website: <https://www.lambresourcecenter.com>

#### THURSDAY-FRIDAY AUG. 11-12

**Idaho Milk Processors Association Annual Conference:** Sun Valley Resort, Sun Valley, Idaho. The conference will focus on industry issues. Website: <https://www.impa.us>

#### SATURDAY AUG. 13 Family Forest Field Day — Southwest Washington

9 a.m.-4 p.m.

L & H Family Tree Farm, 1309 King Road, Winlock, Wash. Whether you own a "home in the woods" or many acres of land, this "out in the woods" educational event is packed with practical "how-to" information that you need to know. Learn more at <https://forestry.wsu.edu/sw/fd2022/>.

#### SATURDAY-SUNDAY AUG. 13-14

**Dufur Threshing Bee 2022:** 6 a.m.-3 p.m. Main Street, Dufur, Ore. Relive the good old days at the Dufur Threshing Bee. Included will be blacksmiths, a one-room school house, the Dufur Historical Society, petting zoo, food booths and artists' booths, tractor pull, vintage car show, hometown dinner and a steam engine display. Contact: Nancy Gibson, 541-993-3429.

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EO Media Group  
dba Capital Press

An independent newspaper published every Friday.

Capital Press (ISSN 0740-3704) is published weekly by EO Media Group, 245 Commercial St. SE, Suite 200 Salem OR 97301.

Periodicals postage paid at Portland, OR, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: send address changes to Capital Press, P.O. Box 2048 Salem, OR 97308-2048.

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