

# NOWA: 'Everybody has really banded together'

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from the aquifers, allowing them to recharge.

The water would be temporarily offset, or mitigated, by area municipalities with certified water rights that are transferred and left in the river.

Wooed by promises of economic and environmental benefits, Oregon lawmakers approved \$11 million in grants during the 2015 Legislature for the pipelines. After years of negotiating with key environmental groups and officials, Reeder said they are now on the cusp of moving forward.

"Everybody has really banded together on this," Reeder said. "It's been really fun to see."

## Three pipelines

Getting to this point was no easy task.

The NOWA proposal builds on previous recommendations by the Columbia River-Umatilla Solutions Task Force, which started in 2012 with support from then-Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber. Its vision was to use water from the nearby Columbia River to aid the ailing aquifers, but do it without harming fish that are protected under the federal Endangered Species Act.

J.R. Cook, who was a member of the task force and has been active in the region's water issues for 15 years, went on to establish NOWA. He said the plan hinges on the three pipelines to deliver water to farms from the Columbia River in exchange for farmers agreeing not to use their wells.

"A lot of our farmers are on 100 percent groundwater, so they don't have any other source," Cook said of the current situation. "Our initial goal is to see if, just by relieving pressures on the system, can we stabilize and begin to see a reverse in the trend of groundwater static level declines in our basin."

The project is divided into three regions. The East Project taps into the Columbia River east of Hermiston and runs about eight miles south to Despain Gulch. The West Project, meanwhile, begins at the Port of Morrow and runs eight miles to an irrigation canal owned by the Columbia Improvement District.

Both projects could break ground in early 2019 as they secure bank financing, and go online by the 2020 irrigation season. The original completion deadline for the state grant was 2019, though Cook said they are working toward a one-year extension with the Water Resources Department.

"These projects are shovel-ready," Cook said. "The landowners are working on their various resolutions and commitments, but they're really gunning to try and get moving."

A third pipeline, named the Ordinance Project — formerly known as the Central Project — is still in flux after the Westland Irrigation District, based in Echo, was forced to abandon ownership to defend itself against

## Water development project set to start

Umatilla Basin critical groundwater areas

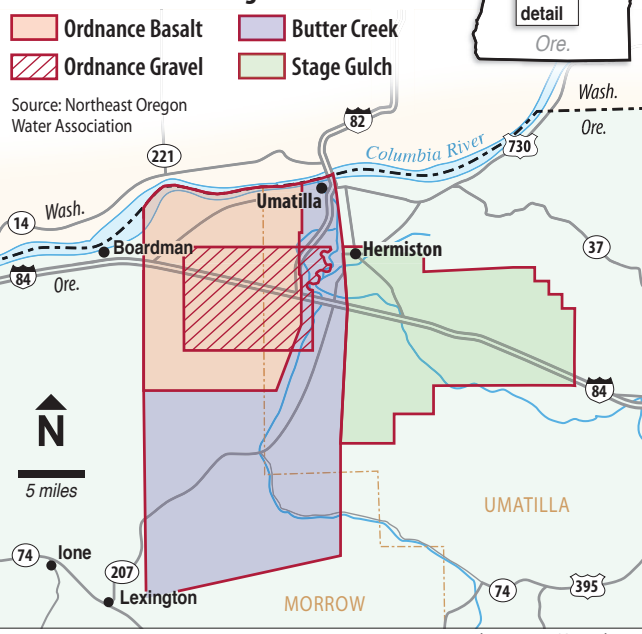


Photo by George Plaven/EO Media Group/Capitol Press  
**Jake Madison, president of Madison Ranches in Echo, said his farm will be included in the West Project, one of three pipelines conceived by the Northeast Oregon Water Association to deliver mitigated Columbia River water to four critical groundwater areas between Hermiston and Boardman. The project will allow Madison Ranches to grow more high-value crops while recharging depleted groundwater aquifers.**

a lawsuit alleging misappropriation of senior water rights. That case was ultimately dismissed by a circuit judge in Baker County.

## East Project

As a condition of the \$11 million state grant, each new pipeline must be publicly owned and operated. In the case of the East Project, 13 landowners had to form a new entity, named the East Improvement District, covering 26,500 irrigated acres.

Carl St. Hilaire, of JSH Farms in Hermiston, serves as the district chairman. He said members faced a steep learning curve working to finance the \$46 million pipeline, especially since the district has no credit history. The East Project will receive \$7 million in state funding, with landowners committing the remaining \$39 million in equity and debt service.

"Given the amount of private risk capital involved in this project, it has not been easy and we have encountered many forks in the road since the funding was approved," St. Hilaire said. "But to be at a point where we are finally seeing the finish line in moving the East Project forward is a testament to the resilience and determination of the (district) members and the region."

Greg Juul, a Hermiston potato farmer and district member, summed it up as "truly a community effort."

"It's a big lift for this community to come

together and get this done," Juul said.

The process has been more straightforward with the West Project, since it is owned by the existing Columbia Improvement District. That pipeline is estimated to cost \$35 million, with \$4 million from the state and \$31 million in private investment.

## High-value crops

Perhaps nowhere in the region is the value of irrigation better illustrated than at Madison Ranches in Echo.

Jake Madison, the fourth-generation president of the family farm, drove his pickup along a dirt road crossing the property, stopping at one point to survey fields of dry grass and sagebrush. Then, as if to prove his point, he went in the opposite direction where the road overlooks a mosaic of green circles and neighboring dairy farms.

The visual juxtaposition is backed up by hard numbers. Dryland wheat, grown without irrigation, produces roughly \$100 per acre. Add 1 acre-foot of water, and the value jumps to \$500 per acre.

An acre-foot covers an area about the size of a football field with 1 foot of water.

Add 3 acre-feet, and farms can grow just about

any high-value crop, such as potatoes and onions, at full rotation, earning up to \$5,000 per acre.

High-value crops also require more workers to grow, harvest and process. In late 2017, Lamb Weston announced a \$250 million expansion of its french fry plant in Hermiston, with the capacity to handle another 300 million pounds of raw potatoes annually, creating 170 new jobs. A similar expansion of the company's facility in Boardman was finished in 2014.

Madison, who also serves on the NOWA board, said the West Project will directly benefit his farm by allowing Madison Ranches to become a full member of the Columbia Improvement District. Currently, Madison Ranches is what's known as an "excess user" in the district, meaning it receives irrigation water for a portion of the growing season until demand outweighs supply, typically by June.

The West Project will more than double the Columbia Irrigation District's boundary, Madison said, allowing farms to water more high-value crops that, in turn, will bolster the local economy.

"We're excited to be able to show what we can do, and what our region is capable of doing economically," Madison said.

NOWA figures the pipelines will spur 3,000 new jobs and \$600 million in increased business activity, justifying the state's investment in the project.

But Cook said the project is about more than economic growth. The main impetus, he said, is using the Columbia River to recover and stabilize the basalt aquifers, which would benefit the entire region.

Earlier this year, Gov. Kate Brown formed the Umatilla Basin Basalt Stabilization Work Group, which met three times between October and December. The group recommended the state create a five-year pilot program beginning in January 2020, to measure aquifer recovery in areas around Stage Gulch and Butter Creek.

In a Dec. 17 letter to Brown, the group requested \$500,000 per year for five years to fund a basalt bank trust account, overseen by a local committee. The money, Cook said, would offset the cost difference for farmers who agree to use irrigation from the Columbia River pipelines instead of pumping their wells — allowing 7,000 acre-feet of groundwater to stay in the ground each year.

"Obviously, the overall goal basin-wide is to raise all boats," Cook said.

Chris Pair, a spokesman for the governor, said that stabilizing groundwater in the Umatilla Basin "has long been a priority for Gov. Brown," and she is considering whether to fund the recommendation.

## BRIEFLY

### Juveniles arrested on string of burglary and theft charges

Two juvenile males were arrested Thursday on a list of charges following complaints in the Irrigon area.

According to a news release from the Morrow County Sheriff's Office, the office had received seven complaints between Dec. 29 and Jan. 3, including instances of theft, trespassing, unauthorized entry into motor vehicles and unauthorized use of a motor vehicle. Deputies investigated and "identified two male juveniles as being the primary suspects."

One of the juveniles had a Morrow County Circuit Court warrant and the other had a felony warrant for running away from the Homestead Youth Lodge in Pendleton, MCSO reported. After receiving information that the suspects were near Sixth Street and Seventh Street in Irrigon on Thursday, deputies engaged in a 10-minute foot pursuit before arresting both juveniles.

The juveniles were arrested on the outstanding warrants and on two counts of second-degree burglary, two counts of unlawful entry into a motor vehicle, two counts of second-degree theft, three counts of third-degree theft, two counts of second-degree criminal trespass and two counts of escape in the third degree. One juvenile had an additional charge of unlawful possession of more than one ounce of marijuana, and the other had additional charges of unlawful entry into a motor vehicle and criminal trespass in the second degree.

Both males were lodged at the juvenile facility at Northern Oregon Regional Correctional Facility in The Dalles, and deputies are continuing to investigate to see if more charges need to be added.

### Sidewalk construction work to begin Sunday in Pendleton

PENDLETON — Construction will begin Sunday along Emigrant Avenue in Pendleton to bring the sidewalk ramps up to current safety standards at the Southwest Sixth, Seventh, Eighth and Ninth street intersections.

According to a release from the Oregon Department of Transportation, Brown Contracting Inc. of Eugene will do the work and it will take several months, with the earliest end date in March depending on weather.

Pedestrians will be detoured to avoid the area and motorists may want to use alternate routes to avoid closures. One lane of traffic will be affected and on-street parking will be reduced.

Work will also include right of way acquisitions, the relocation of some utilities and signs, and modifications to storm drainage inlets as needed, according to the release.

The work will bring the intersections in compliance with new Americans with Disabilities Act standards, and are part of a larger state effort to update curbs on all state highways by 2032.

### Graybeal Distributing sells to Columbia

Pendleton-based beverage company Graybeal Distributing has changed ownership and will function as Columbia Distributing as of late February. Graybeal supplies more than 500 brands of beverages to companies in Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Baker and Wallowa counties.

A press release from Columbia Distributing, which supplies to companies in all three west coast states, said that there will not be much change to the company's day-to-day operations in Eastern Oregon.

Lindi Taylor, a spokesperson for Columbia, said the company would not release the amount that Graybeal sold the company for. She said some of the Oregon brands Columbia supplies include Deschutes Brewery and Hop Valley.

Taylor said the company has about 50 employees in Eastern Oregon, and they don't anticipate any changes in employment.

### Phone and Internet Discounts Available to CenturyLink Customers

The Oregon Public Utility Commission designated CenturyLink as an Eligible Telecommunications Carrier within its service area for universal service purposes. CenturyLink's basic local service rates for residential voice lines are \$15.48-\$17.55 per month and business services are \$23.00-\$28.00 per month. Specific rates will be provided upon request.

CenturyLink participates in a government benefit program (Lifeline) to make residential telephone or broadband service more affordable to eligible low-income individuals and families. Eligible customers are those that meet eligibility standards as defined by the FCC and state commissions. Residents who live on federally recognized Tribal Lands may qualify for additional Tribal benefits if they participate in certain additional federal eligibility programs. The Lifeline discount is available for only one telephone or qualifying broadband service per household, which can be either a wireline or wireless service. Broadband speeds must be 18 Mbps download and 2 Mbps upload or faster to qualify.

A household is defined for the purposes of the Lifeline program as any individual or group of individuals who live together at the same address and share income and expenses. Lifeline service is not transferable, and only eligible consumers may enroll in the program. Consumers who willfully make false statements in order to obtain Lifeline telephone or broadband service can be punished by fine or imprisonment and can be barred from the program.

If you live in a CenturyLink service area, please call 1-855-954-6546 or visit [centurylink.com/lifeline](http://centurylink.com/lifeline) with questions or to request an application for the Lifeline program.



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