

Proposed 17% water fee hike in Oregon meets resistance

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — A proposed 17% fee increase on water transactions and dam inspections has raised concerns about increasing the economic burden on Oregon farmers during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Oregon Water Resources Department is asking lawmakers to raise the fees by passing House Bill 2142, citing a reduced demand for services among water users and lower general fund revenues.

Without the fee increase — which would raise \$510,000 for the water rights transactions and \$55,000 for dam inspections — OWRD would have to cut its staff by 8.83 full-time positions in mid-2021, said Tom Byler, the agency’s director.

“This would have an impact on our ability to carry out our work. While it’s difficult to estimate exactly how that will play out, we know it will slow down our ability and reduce our capacity,” Byler said during a recent legislative hearing. “We anticipate it could create a longer waiting time for applicants as a result.”

Even with the 17.39% fee increase, OWRD would only recover the equivalent



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press, File

A proposed 17% increase in water transaction fees has raised concerns among agricultural groups in Oregon.

of 2.5 full-time positions, which means 6.33 positions would still be lost, he said. The agency has also left 7 positions unfilled during this biennium due to lack of revenues.

The Oregon Farm Bureau opposes HB 2142, arguing that farmers have been hit hard by the pandemic in domestic and international markets, which has already affected their ability to pay government fees.

“This is reflected in the fact that we’re seeing fewer water rights transactions,”

said Mary Anne Cooper, OFB’s vice president of public policy. “People are unable to invest in their farms.”

Though the Farm Bureau supports a fully functional OWRD, fees for water rights transactions have risen repeatedly over the past

The Oregon Water Resources Congress, which represents irrigation districts, hasn’t yet taken a position on HB 2142 but is also troubled by rising government fees — not only at OWRD, but also at other state agencies.

“We need to find a better way to fund this agency,” said April Snell, the group’s executive director. “There needs to be a discussion about how to best fund not only the Water Resources Department but other natural resource agencies.”

This sentiment was echoed by members of the House Water Committee, which is considering the bill.

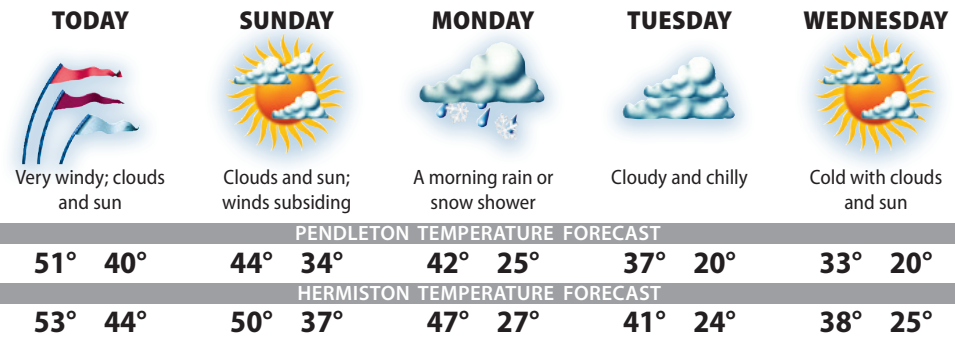
“I am appalled that this is happening. I am appalled this agency is having to gut its staff,” said Rep. Brad Witt, D-Clatskanie.

It’s tough for farmers to support higher fees when they don’t see an improvement in agency performance, said Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane.

Funding for natural resources agencies is broken and too often ends up on the back of the agricultural community, he said.

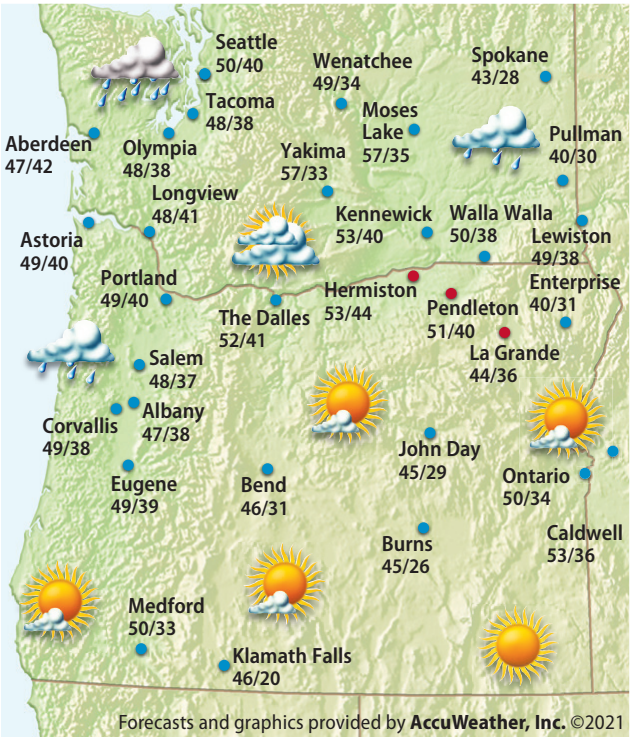
“The farmer or rancher is not the end user of that water,” Owens said. “The end user in my mind is the people who end up consuming the product that the ag community is raising.”

Forecast for Pendleton Area



OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.



ALMANAC

Pendleton

through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.

HIGH

LOW

Yesterday

54°

43°

Normals

44°

28°

Records

65° (2015)

-12° (1989)

PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.

Trace

Month to date

0.08"

Normal month to date

0.23"

Year to date

0.99"

Last year to date

3.28"

Normal year to date

1.61"

Hermiston

through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.

HIGH

LOW

Yesterday

58°

46°

Normals

45°

29°

Records

61° (1967)

-10° (1989)

PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.

0.00"

Month to date

0.12"

Normal month to date

0.17"

Year to date

0.71"

Last year to date

0.27"

Normal year to date

1.45"

WINDS (in mph)

Today

Sun.

Boardman

SW 25-35

WSW 12-25

Pendleton

WSW 25-35

WSW 12-25

SUN AND MOON

Sunrise today

7:10 a.m.

Sunset tonight

5:09 p.m.

Moonrise today

2:59 a.m.

Moonset today

12:03 p.m.

New

First

Full

Last

Feb 11

Feb 19

Feb 27

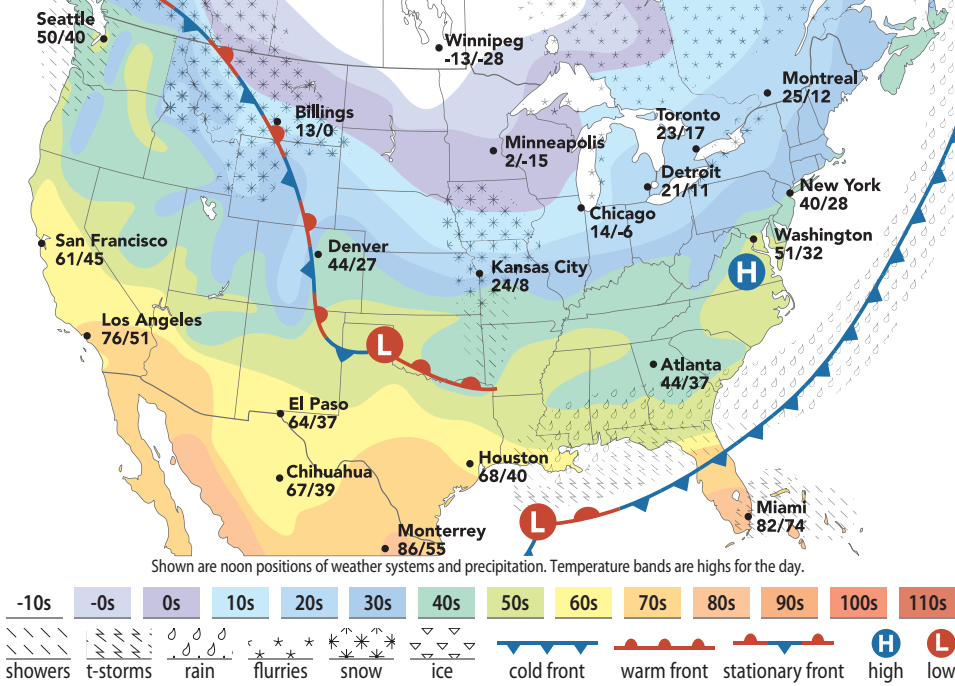
Mar 5

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)

High 82° in Titusville, Fla. Low -12° in Bottineau, N.D.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



Wyden, Merkley propose protections for nearly 4,700 miles of Oregon rivers

Legislation would expand recreation, safeguard water quality and prepare for wildfire

By BRADLEY W. PARKS
Oregon Public Broadcasting

BEND — Oregon’s U.S. senators have proposed an enormous conservation package that would shield thousands of miles of the state’s rivers from development.

Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, both Democrats, on Wednesday, Feb. 3, announced the River Democracy Act of 2021, which would add nearly 4,700 miles of Oregon rivers and streams to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers system.

The bill would nearly triple the total number of river miles with Wild and Scenic protections in Oregon and includes waterways in almost every part of the state. It would also expand the amount of land protected in Wild and Scenic River corridors from a quarter-mile on

both sides of the river to a half-mile.

It amounts to one of the largest public lands conservation proposals in state history.

“I was completely blown away by the number of miles included,” said Gena Goodman-Campbell, who directs the stewardship program for the Oregon Natural Desert Association. “We’re just thrilled that Sen. Wyden decided to go bold.”

The bill aims to boost recreation, protect water quality and wildlife, safeguard cultural resources and foods, and mitigate wildfire risk. It comes after a yearslong public process in which Oregonians nominated waters for protection.

“Oregonians made it loud and clear: they cherish Oregon’s rivers and want them protected for generations to come,” Wyden said in a press release. “More protected rivers and clear management objectives means more jobs, improved wildfire resiliency and a guarantee for the livability of Oregon.”

The senators’ proposal drew swift praise from conservationists, outdoor recreationists, public officials and others.

“In a time where we’re used to just a steady march of development, it’s nice to know that these places can be kept the way they are,” said Tristan Henry, who co-chairs the Oregon chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers.

Congress approved the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968 to shield waterways largely unbothered by humans. The law outlines three designations for protection — wild, scenic and recreational.

Wild rivers are the least-developed of the three and are generally only accessible by trail. Scenic rivers are accessible by road in some spots. Recreational rivers are easiest to get to.

Wyden committed in 2019 to flexing the law’s muscle to make Oregon a national leader for wild and scenic rivers. Oregon currently has more than 2,100 river miles protected under the act.

IN BRIEF

Deaths in Oregon now outnumber births for the 1st time in recorded history

SALEM — For the first time in recorded history, deaths outnumbered births in Oregon.

For years, Oregon’s been averaging about 1,500 more births a year than deaths. But since the great recession in 2008, that average has gradually been dropping.

Josh Lehner, with the Oregon Office of Economic Analysis, said COVID-related deaths last year finally pushed the number into negative territory — not by a lot — but about 200 more Oregonians died last year than were born.

“We’re not seeing a rising number of births in Oregon. We’re seeing a very low fertility rate,” said Lehner. “And deaths have been rising.”

Preliminary numbers show deaths increased about 7% because of COVID-19. But the pandemic is far from the only

reason Oregon passed this new threshold.

Deaths have been rising mainly because the country’s largest generation, baby boomers, is now retiring and dying.

Women of childbearing age are also not having as many children as they say they would like.

Lehner said the reasons are complex, “Whether it’s childcare costs, housing affordability or work-life balance. Like: ‘I’m working so much I won’t have enough time to spend with the kids. Or if I spend more time with the kids, then I won’t make as much money and we’ll have financial problems,’” said Lehner.

But Oregon’s population is far from petering out. When statisticians include the number of people moving into the state, then the population continues to increase at about 1% a year — the 12th fastest in the nation.

So last year there were about 31,000 more Oregonians than the year before. That’s equivalent to the population of Redmond.

— Oregon Public Broadcasting

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