

DEQ increases Port of Morrow fine to \$2.1 million

East Oregonian

BOARDMAN — Oregon Department of Environmental Quality has increased the penalty against the Port of Morrow from \$1.3 million to a little more than \$2.1 million.

State environmental regulators levied the initial fines in January, accusing the port of excessively spreading nitrogen-rich wastewater as fertilizer on area farmland for years. DEQ announced in a statement Friday, June 17, the additional \$800,000 is “for additional violations involving over application of wastewater containing nitrogen to agricultural fields in the Lower Umatilla Basin, an area with longstanding groundwater contamination.”

The Port of Morrow has been appealing the \$1.3 million in fines.

“The Port of Morrow recognizes groundwater contamination is a serious problem, and has been for decades,” port Executive Director Lisa Mittelsdorf said. “The port believes this is a community problem that will require a community solution. By the DEQ’s own



East Oregonian, File

Industrial facilities operate Jan. 11, 2022, at the Port of Morrow near Boardman. Oregon Department of Environmental Quality announced Friday, June 17, it increased the penalty against the port for nitrate pollution from \$1.3 million to a little more than \$2.1 million.

analysis, the port’s industrial wastewater reuse program is responsible for less than 5% of the area’s nitrates. We will continue to work with DEQ to collaborate on a solution that will address what hap-

pens to industrial wastewater during winter months without shutting down the industries generating that wastewater.”

According to the statement from DEQ, the Port

of Morrow is one of many sources contributing to nitrate contamination in northern Morrow and Umatilla counties — an area known as the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater

Management Area.

The primary source of contamination in the area, about 70%, is from fertilizer used on irrigated farmland, according to the management area’s action plan.

Additional contributors are dairy and cattle farms (about 20%), food processing facilities, such as the port that reuse wastewater to irrigate fields (about 5%) and residential septic systems and other sources (about 5%).

The Port of Morrow collects wastewater from food processors, storage facilities and data centers in its industrial park outside Boardman. The port has a DEQ water quality permit that allows it to use the nitrogen-rich wastewater for irrigation on nearby farms, but the permit includes limits on how much nitrogen the port can apply to the farmland and how much nitrate and moisture can be present in soil prior to applications.

“The amended notice cites the port for additional occurrences of applying wastewater containing nitrogen to fields that already had too much existing nitrate or moisture in the soil,” according to the statement. “Having too much nitrate or moisture in the soil when applying wastewater increases the likelihood of nitrates flowing down into the groundwater rather than remaining in the soil for crops to use.”

Interior to launch mental health program for wildland firefighters

By JACOB FISCHLER and AUDREY DUTTON
Oregon Capital Chronicle

BOISE, Idaho — The U.S. Interior Department will create a health and well-being program for wildland firefighters and boost spending on firefighting efforts by \$103 million in fiscal 2022, Secretary Deb Haaland said Friday, June 17.

The additional funding, which Haaland announced at the National Interagency Fire Center, comes as part of the \$1.5 billion in last year’s \$1.2 trillion infrastructure

law signed into law by President Joe Biden that’s meant to address wildfires, which also directed the creation of mental health services for wildland firefighters.

Most of the funding, \$80.9 million, will be used to broaden and hasten work to manage fuels in fire-prone areas and will help the department reach 2 million more acres than it did last year, a roughly 30% increase, according to Interior. Another \$19.4 million will be used to rehabilitate areas after they’ve burned.

The programs are critical now, with climate change

making fires frequent and intense, Haaland said.

“One thing is perfectly clear: That climate change will continue to make fires in the West larger and that we must continue to invest in conservation of our ecosystems,” she said. “We must and we will continue to stay coordinated because the reality is that these days ... it’s ‘fire years,’ no longer ‘fire seasons.’”

Fire impacts

“Hotter, drier conditions cause more extreme fire behavior, and the increased frequency of fires in urban

areas impacts more homes, businesses and communities each and every year.”

The mental health and wellness program was also a product of the infrastructure law, which compelled Interior and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to create programs to address mental health needs, including treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder.

The health program will hire people to respond to critical incidents that require stress management. It will also add health care capacity in four Interior

bureaus — Indian Affairs, Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service — to establish a new system of trauma-support services focused on early intervention.

Officials said the program will augment and better coordinate existing approaches to helping firefighters stay resilient and recover from on-the-job trauma. They expect several millions of dollars of funding from the bipartisan infrastructure bill, but were unable to provide an exact funding amount during a

press briefing Friday.

“We have more support to expand on capacity we already have in the agencies, and that’s what we’re super grateful for,” said Grant Beebe, the fire director for the Bureau of Land Management at NIFC. “So (we’re) not standing up a brand new program but actually bolstering one that we’ve had some experience with, and great success with, with our firefighters.”

In a statement ahead of the announcement, Haaland said the aim “to provide trauma-informed mental health care is critical.”

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