Farmers

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The past several growing seasons have seen farmers leave half of their farms fallow due to the lack of water. The inability to plant half their crops has slashed revenues, making it difficult to pay rents, mortgages, payments for equipment and other bills associated with farming.

Jefferson County farmers pay irrigation bills of around $70 per acre, according to Josh Bailey, general manager for North Unit Irrigation District, which supplies water to the area. Bailey said his irrigation district has requested $30 million in aid to help with emergency drought relief.

Bailey added that no decision has been made on how the funds would be dispersed if they were received. But payments could be made directly to farmers or for emergency drought relief. Around $150 million has been set aside for emergency disaster relief, to help with wildfire, ice storms and drought across the state, he said.

"The (state) emergency board has not voted on how to spend the money yet. We are waiting for them to do that and North Unit requested $30 million," said Bailey, referring to the the official panel of state lawmakers that meets between sessions.

"If we were to get that money, it would be a combination of different things such as funding the district or passing that money on to farmers."

Jos Poland, a Jefferson County dairy farmer, said many farmers in the county are so financially constrained that paying their water bills won't be possible. State aid to fund water bills would help farmers, he said.

Funding support is "absolutely necessary because if there aren't enough people to pay their bill, North Unit could fall apart, and then you don't have anything going on here," said Poland, who supplies organic milk to Eberhard's Dairy Products and Darigold.

North Unit, which irrigates around 58,000 acres of farmland, is a junior water rights holder in Central Oregon and has storage rights to the water at Wickiup Reservoir. Wickiup has run dry the past two years due to a combination of severe drought and greater winter releases to support Oregon spotted frog habitat.

Michael Kohn/The Bulletin

Republican U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, second from left, speaks with irrigators, county commissioners and farmers in Madras on Friday.

Speaking to a group of around 20 farmers and ranchers on Friday at the Central Oregon Livestock Auction Yard near Madras, Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, said he is open to seeking aid for farmers and ranchers in Central Oregon. Assistance could come from remaining COVID-19 relief funding supplied by the state.

"This would be considered emergency funds, similar to what happens when there is a hurricane or tsunami," said Bentz, who represents all of Central and Eastern Oregon and parts of Southern Oregon. "The money would not be available instantly. It would come through insurance over a period of time."

Bentz was also supportive of a plan to build a pump station on Lake Billy Chinook to draw water from the lake to fill Haystack Reservoir, instead of pulling water from the Crooked River.

The project would allow North Unit to use its full Crooked River water rights.

Mike Britton, executive manager for North Unit, said that the pumping project will cost $300 million to $400 million to build with an annual operating cost of $3 million to $5 million.

"It's a heavy lift for everyone in this room to pull a project like that, but having said that, with trillions of dollars coming out of infrastructure packages, now is the time to take advantage of that and get a project like that done."

Britton said before the district invests more heavily in the development of that project, the irrigation district must first get approvals, or letters of nonopposition, from Portland General Electric and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, which jointly manage the Pelton Round-Butte Dam complex that created Lake Billy Chinook.

"Once we have those two things in our hands, we will be able to run full blast, but until we have that it doesn't make sense to go out and spend millions of dollars only to have somebody come back and say, you know, it's a nice project but it's not something we can support," said Britton.

Britton added that the pumping project so far does not appear to have any strong opposition from environmentalists.

"The folks that typically sue us or the government, I have spoken with them and they won't come out and support the project, but they think it's a great idea," said Britton.

"It checks the boxes for a lot of the issues that are facing the basin and quite honestly I think some of our enemies could be allies in this type of a project."

■ *Reporter: 541-617-7818, mkohn@bendbulletin.com*

Wyden

Continued from A1

The Warm Springs water treatment plant, and the associated pipes that deliver water to customers, has failed repeatedly over the past two years, resulting in multiple notices to reservation residents to boil their water before using it. The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs are now looking to the federal government to help fund a massive renovation project.

Wyden, along with fellow Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley, also a Democrat, visited Warm Springs in October and pledged to help the tribes.

The infrastructure bill contains $11 billion in funding for tribes, a cash pot that Warm Springs hopes to tap next year. Included in the funding is $3.5 billion for tribal sanitation projects.

Other funds in the bill include $3 billion for tribal transportation, $2.5 billion to address Native American water rights settlements, and $2 billion for broadband access on tribal lands.

Projects that could get funded at Warm Springs include the replacement of the 40-year-old drinking water treatment plant and the installation of new underground pipes across the reservation.

Ryan Brennecke/Bulletin file photo

Flint Scott, a Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs member, moves a rack of 5-gallon containers of water while working at the distribution center in August 2019. The water was collected when residents were asked to boil their water before they used it.

Louie Pitt Jr., the director of government affairs and planning for the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, said plans for system upgrades are gaining strength.

"We are preparing with grant people and others to be shovel ready when the opportunity comes down," said Pitt. "We are doing the internal things that need to be done."

Pitt added that the time is past due to start the improvements in earnest.

"Is it too much to ask to have clean drinking water throughout the year?" Pitt said. "Let's get on it guys."

It's not clear how much money will be needed to overhaul and modernize the system. Estimates have ranged from $60 million to $130 million.

How much is needed to overhaul the system is not yet known. Bryan Mercier, northwest regional director for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, estimates the repairs could cost upwards of $60 million. Previous estimates have suggested the total could be upwards of $130 million.

But Mercier adds that the cost will ultimately depend on plans put forward by the tribes.

"I'm hopeful the tribe will develop a long-term sustainable plan that will ensure adequate operations and maintenance funds will be generated to maintain the system after the upcoming investment," said Mercier. "That may mean metering and a rate structure to generate revenue for the system."

"Is it too much to ask to have clean drinking water throughout the year? Let's get on it guys."

— Louie Pitt Jr., the director of government affairs and planning for the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs

When could the government cut the tribes a check? Wyden said he hopes to see work begin in 2022.

"I want to start seeing improvements next year," said Wyden. "This is unconscionable, really unconscionable, that those who lived on these lands for so long would be having these boil your water days. Unacceptable, unconscionable."

■ *Reporter: 541-617-7818, mkohn@bendbulletin.com*