

## More time for comment on lake irrigation proposal

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send comments is posted on the heppner.net web site.

Following a Nov. 7 article in the Heppner Gazette-Times, one member of the new Willow Creek Water District which is requesting the irrigation water, talked to the Gazette.

Brian Thompson, who raises hay along Willow Creek between Heppner and Lexington, said much of the comments he has heard on the negative impact on recreation at the lake are unfounded, and some of the information in the environmental impact statement is incorrect.

Thompson says there will be little difference between the amount of water in the lake for the past three years and what would be there under the

new proposal.

The Corps, through the Bureau of Reclamation, has contracted extra irrigation water over the past three years under special drought declarations. Thompson said in 2006 the Bureau contracted 1559.72 acre feet of water and sold, or the irrigators actually used, 1,128.82 acre feet. In 2007 2,474.80 was contracted and 1,182.42 was actually used. "It's not going to change much from the past three years," Thompson said.

Under the proposed long-term agreement the Corps would be authorized to release up to 2,500 acre feet, an amount Thompson says would most likely not be used, and he gave several reasons. One is that irrigators do not need to buy water from the lake until their legal

water rights run out during the year. He also said most irrigators shut off the water to harvest hay and alfalfa in late summer and would not use the allocated amount during that time period.

Thompson also disputed the amount of visitors to the lake cited in the environmental impact statement. He especially pointed out the estimated 42,686 to 47,657 visitors during April through June 2006 and 2007. "That would be 500 per day. I drive by there everyday and there is no way there is that many people there," Thompson said. The environmental report said these visitors "resulted in \$600,000 in visitor spending within 30 miles of the lake. Visitor trip spending was estimated to result in \$650,000 in total sales,

\$340,000 in total income, and supported 17 jobs in the local community surrounding the lake." The report did not directly estimate dollar losses of recreational income as a result of less water in the lake.

Thompson says the number of visitors will not be effected saying the number of visitors has not dropped dramatically over the past three years during drought draw down, proving that a permanent extra release will not hurt recreation.

Thompson also said that the estimated losses to alfalfa crops cited in the environmental reported, were underestimated, as the report placed alfalfa values at \$90 to \$100 per ton, when it was closer to \$150 Thompson said.

The environmental impact statement was prepared for the Corps by a consultant hired by the Willow Creek Water District, of which Thompson is a member. He said the district, which is made up of eight irrigators up and down Willow Creek, has spent about \$45,000 so far on the project. In the past three years there have been six irrigators using the drought released water, but there may be up to eight in the future.

He pointed out that the report cited two diversion points on Willow Creek, but there could be up to eight diversion points he said.

The irrigators will pay for the water, however the price will be higher that the past three years. According to Ron Eggers of the Portland Bureau of Reclamation irrigators paid \$8 per acre feet the past three years; however that will be raised to a minimum of \$35 per acre feet.

Eggers said the \$35 price is base on operating and maintenance (O&M) expenses of the dam, and then passed on to irrigators. "We didn't do a review of O&M (when drought releases began)," Eggers said of the lower \$8 price. He said the O&M expenses have since been reviewed and increased.

Eggers said that an additional construction fee could be added to the \$35 acre feet price. The dam cost \$6.9 million to build in 1983, and to recover that cost up to an additional \$50 per acre feet could be added to the \$35. However, Eggers said an ability to pay factor, based on the farming profit of the irrigators could lower that amount.

The contracts to the irrigators would most likely be 25 to 40 years, he said, and although the price will be set in the contract, there may be provisions for price review. He said there would not be a minimum amount irrigators would be required to purchase.

The long-term irrigation proposal has caused quite a bit of discussion in Heppner on the negative impact there may be on recreation at the dam, and the subsequent economic impact on businesses in Heppner.

The report addressed the physical recreation impact on the lake of selling more irrigation water on a long-term basis. "Water-based recreation uses of Willow Creek Lake would be affected by the proposed action. The lake would be drawn down earlier and farther than under typical operations. The early, lower drawdown would reduce the lake area available for

recreational boating use. However, the usability of the boat launching facility at the project should not be affected," the impact statement said. "In addition to the decreased surface area, the drawdown for irrigation would expose muddy slopes and banks that are aesthetically unappealing and restrict access to the shoreline of the lake. Also, some economic losses in the local area would occur because of the reduction in water-based recreation use. Sport fishing opportunities may be decreased as the population of largemouth bass and fingerling rainbow trout could be reduced or eliminated by the proposed irrigation drawdown. However," the Corps concluded, "ODFW (Oregon Dept. Fish & Wildlife) restocks catchable trout in the lake on an annual basis, which will help alleviate some of the effects to the recreational fishery."

The Corps did not attach a dollar amount to the potential loss of recreation usage at the lake.

In response to the ongoing discussion, Thompson, as an irrigator and member of the irrigation board, released the following statement:

**Ground water preservation-** In the Willow Creek Valley, many well owners (both domestic and irrigation) have noticed decreased ground water levels in their wells. By making the stored surface water available to irrigators many have been able to turn off their wells and replace the water with supplemental surface water from the reservoir. Ground water preservation will only become more important as more users move into the area.

**Revenue-** Irrigators are the only users of the reservoir that pay a fee for the use of the water. Flood control, recreation, fish and wildlife pay no direct fees for the use of the water. Irrigators have been paying \$8 per acre foot of water release over the past 3 years. The proposed fee for the long term contract water is \$30 to \$33 per acre foot. (Editor Note: Bureau of Reclamation says a minimum of \$35 will be charged)

**Direct Economic Benefits-** Water flows in Willow Creek typically become too low for irrigation in early July; the water from the reservoir is stored in the spring and released to the irrigators throughout the late summer. This supplemental water allows for irrigators to continue growing crops throughout the growing season. The additional crops grown require significant increases in inputs. These inputs include fertilizers, sprays, labor, electricity, freight and fuel to name a few. The bulk

of these inputs are purchased locally. The additional water will make it possible for farmers to grow higher dollar crops such as mint, garlic, potatoes, onions, watermelon, grapes and orchard crops. These types of crops will require a much higher level of inputs resulting in significant economic gains for local businesses.

**Beneficial use of the Water-** Prior to releasing water for irrigation, the Corps of Engineers would store the water for the entire summer and release it into Willow Creek October 1 annually, draining the reservoir to low pool level for flood control. These releases typically would take place over a one to two week period and serve of no benefit to anyone. In a normal year, Willow Creek runs dry for nearly two months, killing most of the life in the stream. By releasing the water over the late summer we now have constant stream flows that reach 20 to 30 miles down stream. Because of Blue Green Algae blooms in recent years the reservoir has become essentially unusable during the summer months for fishing, swimming or any activity that involves contact with the water.

**Aesthetics-** By making irrigation water available, the Willow Creek Valley will remain green well into the fall. We believe that this directly influences the aesthetics of the area and makes South Morrow County a desirable place to live, work, visit and invest, the statement concluded.

The Corps of Engineers had said earlier there would not be a public meeting in Heppner on the proposal, however, this week said there may be a meeting if new information is presented. A Corps committee is meeting November 29 to decide if a meeting will be held here. Meanwhile the Corps will be accepting public comment on the irrigation release proposal until December 15 and anyone wishing to comment should contact Carolyn Schneider at: Carolyn.B.Schneider@usace.army.mil email, 503-808-4770, or regular mail at District Engineer, U.S. Army Corps of Engineer District, Portland, Attn: CCENWP-E/Carolyn Schneider, PO Box 2946, Portland, OR 97208-2946.

Mailed comments should be postmarked by December 15.

A link to the complete copy of the environmental assessment is available at [www.heppner.net](http://www.heppner.net).

## Former exchange student returns 12 years later for visit



Students at Ione School listen attentively as Thierry and Celeste talk about their trip around the world.



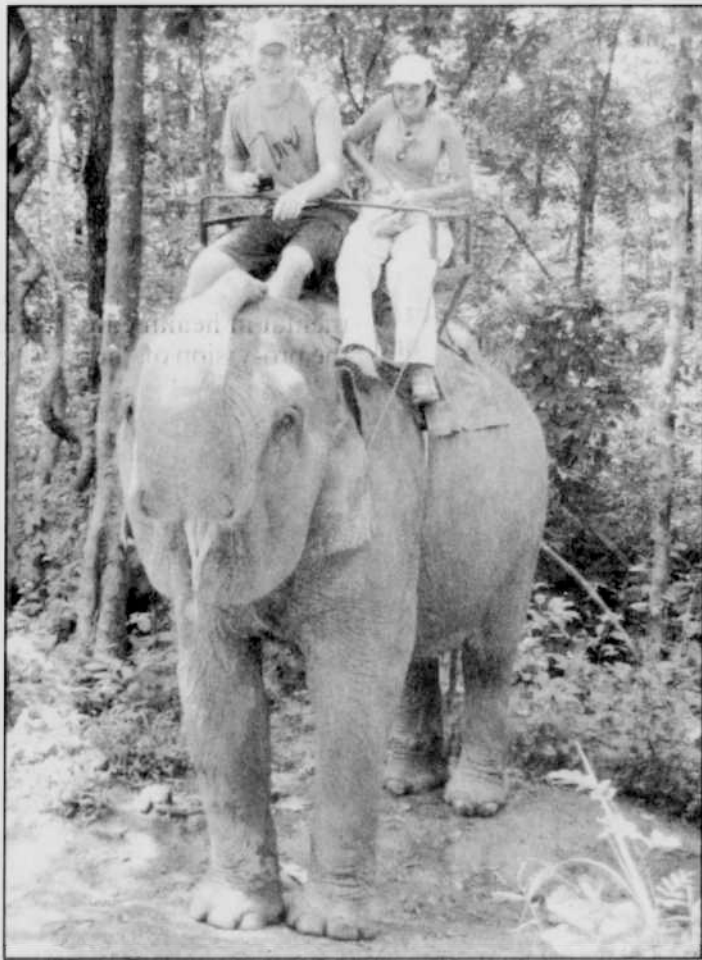
Jim and Monica Swanson took Thierry and Celeste for a day in the snow.



Celeste and Thierry in front of the Taj Mahal.



Celeste and Thierry on one of their many stops around the world.



Thierry and Celeste took the time to ride an elephant.

-Continued from Page one about touring the world, and in December of 2006 made the decision to do so. The couple quit their jobs and began the long process of retaining appropriate visas and vaccinations. And finally, in March of 2007, began their yearlong tour of the world. They have traveled to 11 countries so far.

In November the two finally arrived in Ione, happily greeted by Thierry's "American Family." The two will be at the Swan-

son's home through Friday, November 23. On Monday, November 19, Thierry and Celeste spoke to students at Ione School about their travels. They put together a slideshow and talked extensively about their travels and experiences. The students were especially intrigued by the videos that were taken in many of the countries, especially one with the couple riding elephants.

The couple will

leave on Friday and continue on to Mexico. From there they plan to travel by land to Panama and several other countries in South America. Their tour will end in Celeste's homeland of Brazil.

The couple also mentioned that during their travels they ran into another world traveling couple from Bend. For more information about their travels, you can log on to their website at [www.avolta.fr](http://www.avolta.fr).

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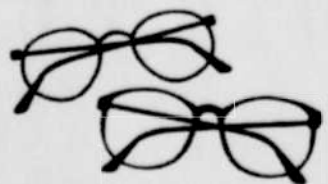
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