

Willow Creek resident unhappy with Corps water release

Says last week's 'wall of water' was destructive

By David Sykes

A local woman who lives on Willow Creek is angry with the Corps of Engineers for their unannounced release of water

from the Willow Creek Dam June 1 that she says damaged not only irrigation equipment but animal habitat and protective stream vegetation as well.

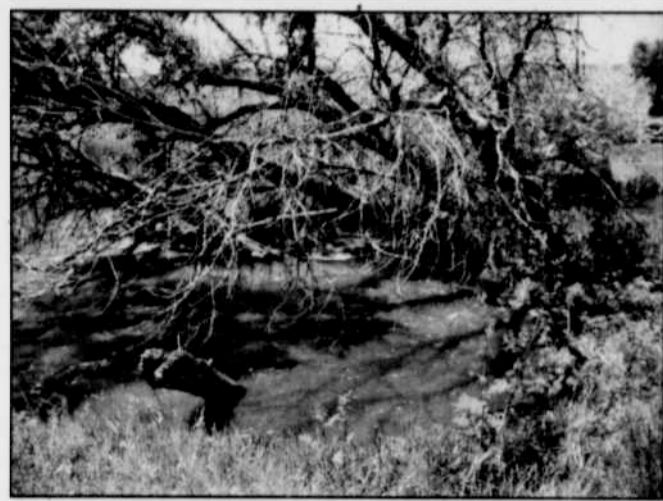
"Around 11 a.m. June 1 you released a four-foot wall of water. This I know because you knocked out our irrigation pump," Laurie Barrow, who lives on a place between Heppner and Lexington that straddles Willow Creek, emailed the Corps of Engineers. The Corps operates the Willow Creek Dam and controls the amount of water that is released through the dam into the creek downstream.

Barrow says when the Corps releases large amounts of water without notifying anyone downstream it causes damage, and she has had enough of it.

"Our small community takes pride in our creek and works hard to protect it. Many individuals, businesses, community organizations, and our school, have put in countless hours working to keep our creek viable," Barrow said in her email to the Corps following the June 1 release. "We were told (by another government entity) that our creek water temperature was too high, and so were certain bacteria counts. What did we do? We have cleaned banks, planted shrubs, bushes, trees and grasses to shade the water. We have tried to clean up what was making the water bad. What have you done? You have destroyed banks, uprooted shrubs, bushes, trees and grasses," Barrow told the Corps.

Barrow also lamented the potential damage to wildlife living along the creek. "We have nesting populations of geese, ducks, pheasants, blue herons, and other water fowl that depend on this area for food and shelter. Or, should I say we did. I know that not every water fowl nests where they will be washed away, but feeding has been severely curtailed. This is spring, nesting, eggs, young," she said.

Laurie Rice of the Corps of Engineers, and a Willow Creek operator, said she was not monitoring the lake inflow or creek outflow on June 1, but did respond to Barrow's email and defended the release, saying there was unexpected rainfall gathering behind the dam. "When I left the office on Thursday (May 27) there was no indication that the inflow would come up as high as it did. As you noted, there had been rain all month and we had not seen flows go nearly as high in the area. There is not a river forecast for the creek and as I'm sure you know



The water level of Willow Creek came up suddenly and unannounced June 1, causing anger with the Corps of Engineers and concern for those with property along the creek. (Photo taken in Lexington area.)—Photo by David Sykes

from experience, weather forecasts change frequently. The snowpack was virtually melted and we had no reason to believe we would see the flow fluctuate as high. The dam is safe, but the storage above the summer pool is exclusive flood control space and this was not a flood event. In fact, the flow in the creek was not as high as it reached the past two years during the spring freshet (a small sudden flood or rise in the level of a river, caused by heavy rainfall or a rapid thaw), Rice wrote.

"I checked the creek gage downstream of the project and the stage went up one foot when the flow was increased. I do not know where you are located on the creek, but if you experienced a '4 ft wall of water' I can only assume it was from additional contribution from other creeks in the area, local runoff into the creek downstream of the dam and/or debris," Rice added.

Rice said the Corps values wildlife and vegetation along the creek and would not purposefully harm them. "We also value the creek. We work with the Morrow County Soil and Water Conservation District annually to adjust the flows to allow for the Watershed Field Day activities which includes planting willows. This flow event would have occurred with or without the dam and the trees and wildlife would have experienced the same flow," she said.

Barrow said she was grateful for having received a response from the Corps, since she had been contacting them for the last three years with no response. While Barrow said the water head might not have risen quite four feet, did say that her place is above Rhea Creek so there would have been little contribution from other creeks, and that Willow Creek "does not have the ability to spread out much, so as it picks up debris, generally the head gets taller." Barrow wants the

Corps to work closer with the local people to manage the water flow and in turn minimize damage downstream. She also mentioned the damage to fishing in the creek.

"If you truly value our creek, then you would pay more attention to its flow and work with us to maintain a viable ecosystem. I think the Morrow Soil & Water event you are talking about is a few hours of your dam time a couple of days a year," she said. "Did you know that our creek had recently been stocked with fish for the fishermen? Again if you truly valued our creek and this area, you would have known that this event happens annually, and adjusted flows to support this. In fact we have had people ask us why the fishing on the creek has deteriorated so much over the last few years. We tell them to call the Corps, and let them know that their management is very poor," Barrow wrote.

"Incremental release steps would be a good start, but long term management would be a better," she said.

Rice said the Corps would try and be more responsive to local people in the future. "I can assure that you that in the future we will try to make flow changes in incremental steps whenever possible," she wrote to Barrow in a return email.

"I have tried for the last two years to put together a distribution list of irrigators in the area so they can receive the operations schedules as we send them out. So far, there has been very little interest. I would also like to set up a calling tree so that when flow is going to exceed a predetermined level, we can initiate the calling tree and you and others can inform your neighbors. Perhaps you or someone else you copied on your email is interested in being added to the existing distribution list or spearheading the calling tree," Rice wrote to Barrow.

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After 30 years Ball to retire from MCGG

By David Sykes

After 30 years with the Morrow County Grain Growers, most recently as accounts payable bookkeeper, Bonnie Ball is retiring.

Ball, who lives with her husband Bob in Lone, started with the Grain Growers June 30, 1980. Her first job was handling paper work for the parts department and the shop. Manager of MCGG at that time was Larry Mills. She was also given the job of making parts runs, sometimes into Washington. "I used to do parts runs to Pendleton, Hermiston even up to Connell Washington," she says. "When they needed their parts they needed them right away, and I could sometimes be gone all day picking up and dropping off parts." She recalls one time she went to the airport in Pasco to pick up some parts that were suppose to be coming in on a certain flight. The parts did not make that flight and would be coming on the next one. So she waited for them. "I don't think Larry was very happy having to pay me for shopping all day," Bonnie says with a smile.



Bonnie Ball

One of the changes she has seen in Morrow County farming over the years is there are fewer small family size farms now and more of the bigger ones. At the Co-op itself she says computerization has done a lot to change things. "I have been through five computer system upgrades, and as someone who doesn't really like change, I always thought what was wrong with the one we had," she says.

Her move the front office started when being helped then MCGG employee Debbie Koffler handle front office duties like filing and statements. She said when Debbie left she moved into accounts payable as a full time job.

What is Ball going to do with her time when she leaves the job this week? "I have lots of little projects and I have a three-year old grandson who I will be looking after more. "He is the only one not in school," she says of her six grandchildren. Her son Brian lives in Colorado and has two children, and her daughter Brandi Orem lives in Lone with four children. Her husband Bob works at the coal fired plant in Boardman.

An open house in honor of Ball's retirement is being held this Thursday, June 10, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Lexington office and the public is invited to stop by and wish her well.

Missing mushroom picker found by forest service employee

On Saturday, June 5, the Morrow County Sheriff's Office from Joyce Overland reporting that her sister, Arlene Kusel, 70, of White City was missing in the forest south of Heppner. The sisters were in the Shaw Grade area with several family members looking for mushrooms.

According to MCSO, Kusel was supposed to be staying near the vehicles but when the family returned at approximately 10:15 a.m. she was nowhere

to be found. After looking for her for approximately three hours, Overland contacted the sheriff's office. Deputies and the Morrow County Mobile Command Unit were dispatched to help with the search.

In addition to M.C. patrol deputies, M.C. OHV deputies and M.C. Road Department brought out ATVs for use. Additional personnel support was provided by Oregon State Police, Umatilla County Sheriff's

Office Search and Rescue, Heppner Fire Department, and Morrow County Road Department.

At 9 p.m. the search was disbanded due to nightfall, but, at 3:15 a.m. Kusel was located by Tim Collins of the United States Forest Service who had continued to search throughout the night. Kusel, who had been missing for 17 hours, had spent the night in a shelter that she had set up. She was found wet, sore, and cold.

FSA county executive director moving to Nebraska

Darcy Vial, county executive director for the USDA Morrow County Farm Service Agency, will work her last day in the Heppner office on Wednesday, June 30.



Darcy Vial

Vial, who has worked the last two of her three years with the USDA FSA in Heppner, will be moving to Nebraska. She will be working as the

county executive director of the FSA in Kearney, NE. Her fiancé, Clint Sexson, will be taking over his father's ranch in Nebraska.

"I'm sad to leave Eastern Oregon," said Vial, "but we're excited to go home and take over the family ranch."

Kyl Carnine will take Vial's place as county

executive director of the Heppner FSA. She currently is the county executive director in Sherman County. She will be transitioning into the Heppner job on June 21.

The FSA handles programs including conservation, farm program payments and handles some crop insurance, as well as administers USDA farm programs out of the office.

Irrigon High School senior arrested on sodomy charges

According to the Morrow County Sheriff's Office, they received a call from Good Shepherd Hospital on Wednesday, June 2, regarding an 18 year old woman who had been sexually assaulted in Irrigon. Deputies and de-

tectives responded to investigate and determined that the crime had happened earlier that day.

MCSO later arrested Hernan Hernandez Vera, 19, of Irrigon at his residence. Vera was a senior

at Irrigon High School and was scheduled to graduate June 4. He was transported and lodged in the Umatilla County Jail on three counts of Sodomy in the First Degree. Total bail was set at \$150,000.

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