

# Homegrown



## Water right takes first step toward certification

Project could benefit local agriculture

By **GEORGE PLAVER**  
Staff writer

The Port of Umatilla and city of Hermiston are making progress on certifying a key water right to deliver more irrigation water from the Columbia River.

It's another step forward in a long and complicated process that, if successful, could mean big-time growth for the region's agricultural economy.

Last year, the port agreed to lease an unused portion of its Columbia River water right — 100 cubic feet per second — to the Northeast Oregon Water Association, an organization working to expand farming in Umatilla and Morrow counties. NOWA is currently working with policymakers and environmental groups to apply for new irrigation water from the Columbia as part of an ambitious, multi-phase project to grow more acres of high-value crops

like onions and potatoes.

As part of the deal, NOWA intends to leave the port's water in stream as mitigation for native fish including salmon and steelhead. But before that can happen, the port's water right must be officially certified by the Oregon Water Resources Department.

That's where Hermiston recently came into play. The Port of Umatilla has a full municipal and industrial water right of 155 cubic feet per second from the Columbia. One-third of that was already allocated to Hermiston for operating a regional water system intended to lure in new development.

Water for the regional system is pumped nine miles from the river at McNary Industrial Park to a treatment plant at Highway 207 and Feedville Road, where it gets distributed to the city, Hermiston Generating Station, Simplot, Shearer's Foods and Calpine Corp. The remaining 100 cfs of water has not been developed. That's what the port agreed to lease to NOWA, following nearly three years of negotiations.

Before that lease can move forward, the full water right needs to be certified. To do that, Hermiston needed to prove it was capable of pumping all that water, thereby proving its "beneficial use."

The regional water system certainly isn't built to handle all 155 cfs at once — that's nearly 70,000 gallons per minute. Instead, the Water Resources Department allows municipal water rights to be certified in quarters. To pump even a quarter of the full right, the city and port still had to install a new pump along the river.

Hermiston City Council approved making improvements to the system last December, which cost \$650,000 and was paid for by a state Regional Solutions grant. Last week, the city finally pumped just a little more than 39 cfs through its system for four hours, satisfying the minimum requirement for the first 25 percent of the water right.

City Manager Byron Smith said they were excited to clear that first hurdle.

"We've been pumping water for

many years, but to get the certificate and really solidify the water right, we had to do this process," Smith said. "Now, we're just checking the boxes and jumping through the hoops."

Smith figures it will take roughly 18 months to repeat the process three more times for the remaining 75 percent of the right. In the meantime, the port can submit what's known as a "claim of beneficial use" to get the first chunk of water certified, which allows NOWA to follow up on its own application.

"Those applications are ready to submit once the water right is through the process," Smith said.

With water rights in place, NOWA plans to use money allocated by the Legislature in 2015 to start building pipelines and infrastructure spanning three distinct areas from Boardman to east of Hermiston.

Smith anticipates Hermiston would benefit from much of that growth.

"We hope that we can assist in getting some more job creation out of this, and boost the economy for our area," he said.



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The Northeast Oregon Water Association has begun testing pumps on the Columbia River, like the ones seen here, to certify beneficial use of newly acquired water rights.



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