



DECADES OF WORK

East Improvement District dedicates \$50 million East Project

By BEN LONERGAN
STAFF WRITER

More than six decades after regulators first documented groundwater declines in Umatilla and Morrow counties, the East Project irrigation system was dedicated before a crowd of about two dozen along the Columbia River on Tuesday, May 11.

The more than \$50 million project aims to provide farmers with river water in lieu of pumping from the ground in an effort to recharge depleted aquifers and allow farmers to grow higher value crops.

“It wouldn’t be possible unless there was a lot of people supporting it, and then the benefits are going to be broad,” said Carl St. Hilaire, president of JSH Farms in Hermiston. “Just as the support was broad, the benefits will be broad in terms of economic benefits for the entire community.”

St. Hilaire is the district chairman of the East Improvement District, the public entity created to build and operate the East Project. The district was created by 13 landowners and spans 26,500 irrigated acres.

“I think the main thing is it’s kind of a miracle that the stakeholders could get together and agree on promoting a project,” St. Hilaire said.

While the improvement district was founded to take advantage of \$7 million in state funding, that left the landowners on the hook for the remainder of the projected \$46 million price tag. With no credit history in the district’s name, landowners committed the remainder of the funding

in equity and debt service.

“I think 75 to 80% of our budget was financed and therefore we need to use the water over as many acres as possible so we can keep our debt service cost down and get things paid for,” St. Hilaire said.

Despite the financing woes, St. Hilaire said he and others are excited for the opportunity to be done with construction and focus on the farming and water mitigation aspects of the project.

“The issue for farming operations is we need the water but we don’t need the distraction of a construction project,” said St. Hilaire. “The other issue is we want to fully utilize the asset, so that means we’re going to pursue a full set of mitigation water.”

Decades in the making

Among those who spoke at the dedication was Rep. Bobby Levy, R-Echo, who used the opportunity to outline the decades-long process that led to the East Project. Levy, whose husband’s farm is among those in the East Project’s distribution area, explained that in 1954, just one year after she was born, the Bureau of Reclamation made a determination that the irrigable land in the Umatilla River watershed exceeded available groundwater supply. She went on to outline various milestones that led to the East Project.

“What makes this project so unique is the level of commitment and decades of collaboration, trust building and compromise that lead to our ability to be here today,” she said.

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East Improvement District Chairman Carl St. Hilaire, left, and Rep. Bobby Levy unveil a plaque during the dedication of the East Project on Tuesday, May 11, 2021.



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East Improvement District chairman Carl St. Hilaire, left, and Rep. Bobby Levy, R-Echo, cut a ribbon during the dedication of the East Project along the Columbia River on Tuesday, May 11, 2021.

Migrant Education Program celebrates graduating seniors

By BEN LONERGAN
STAFF WRITER

The sound of music spread across the lawn at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center, as students in the InterMountain Education Service District’s Migrant Education Program celebrated graduation on Saturday, May 15, in Hermiston.

The event, in its second year, offered recognition to graduating high school seniors, preschool students entering kindergarten and their families, according to the IMESD’s Director of Migratory Education and Assessment Eric Volger.

“It’s just to give a little bit of extra recognition for some of the challenges that are faced when being mobile,” he said. “Many of these students transfer multiple times in their school career so picking up in a different school, trying to catch up — much less graduate — is a pretty awesome accomplishment.”

As Umatilla High School senior Jennifer Rincon sat with her family, she reflected on her last two years at Umatilla High School.

When Rincon and her family moved to Umatilla from Porterville, California, two years ago she didn’t know many people and was struggling to adjust to the new school. However, two years later the 18-year-old high school student is preparing to graduate high school and attend Oregon State University next year.



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Umatilla High School senior Jennifer Rincon, left, takes a selfie while waiting for the the start of the InterMountain Education Service District’s Migrant Education Program graduation ceremony at Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center in Hermiston on Saturday, May 15, 2021.

“EVEN AFTER GRADUATING COLLEGE I WANT TO ALSO BE INVOLVED IN THE MIGRANT PROGRAM TO HELP OTHER STUDENTS LIKE THEY HELPED ME.”

Umatilla High School senior Jennifer Rincon

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