

Lamb Weston Hermiston plant polluted groundwater

BY ALEX BAUMHARDT
Oregon Capital Chronicle

Lamb Weston's French fry production plant in Hermiston has been discharging too much nitrate-loaded water onto area farms, according to the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

The wastewater flowing from the plant has contaminated the groundwater, causing nitrate levels in some nearby wells to measure four to seven times the safe limit set by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, according to DEQ.

The state agency on March 31

warned the company that it faced enforcement action for contaminating the groundwater.

It was the second such notice issued to the company in recent months. In November, DEQ told the company it had been discharging too much tainted water on area farmland and faced enforcement action for that as well. The agency doesn't disclose such notices on its website or otherwise publicize the findings until an enforcement has been made.

The notices ask the company about what steps it intends to take to cure the violations. For the most recent notice, Lamb Weston has 45

days. The agency then will consider whether to require corrective action or fine the company, according to Laura Gleim, public affairs specialist at DEQ.

The Hermiston french fry plant is Lamb Weston's second largest plant in the Columbia River Basin. As of 2019, the plant had more than 500 employees who made nearly 750 million pounds of frozen potato products annually, according to Lamb Weston's website.

Company officials could not be immediately reached Monday, April 18, for comment.

The violations were discovered when the plant applied to renew its

water discharge permit from DEQ. The permit allows the plant to recycle water used to wash and process potatoes, which come into the plant covered in soil and fertilizers. The facility distributes the wastewater to nearby farms as a source of nutrient-rich water for irrigation.

But Lamb Weston overapplied the water on farms 75 times between 2016 and 2020, according to compliance reports that DEQ reviewed. During that time, 189 tons of nitrate in excess of permitted levels were applied in an area already deemed a vulnerable groundwater management area.

Such areas receive extra

resources and planning from DEQ and designated committees in the area to reduce groundwater contamination.

DEQ said in its notices that wells down slope from where Lamb Weston's nitrate-rich wastewater was applied had levels of nitrate between 36 and 79 parts per million. EPA limits for safe drinking water are no more than 10 parts per million.

Nitrate is difficult and expensive to remove from water, and for those who rely on wells for their drinking water, getting rid of nitrate requires filters that cost thousands of dollars.

DEQ seeks public comments on Port of Morrow water permit

BY ALEX BAUMHARDT
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The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality is asking the public to weigh in on a revised water permit for the Port of Morrow after it violated its existing permit more than 1,100 times.

From 2018 to 2021, the state's second largest port dumped wastewater on farmland containing 165 tons more nitrate than the permit allowed.

In January, the DEQ fined the port nearly \$1.3 million for the violations. The port is appealing.

Nitrate is a compound in fertilizer used in farming. Many crops, including potatoes and wheat, are processed at the Port of Morrow before being shipped by river, rail and road. That processing puts remnants of fertilizer into the wastewater.

The port's water permit requires treatment of the wastewater before it is sold to nearby farms for irrigation. It is essentially a wastewater recycling program, but when that water is too high in nitrate from the fertilizer, the excess moves into the groundwater and can contaminate aquifers that local well users and water utilities depend on. The port produces about 3.6 billion gallons of wastewater annually.

Nitrate is difficult and expensive to remove from wells, requiring filters that cost thousands of dollars. If water with high levels of nitrate is consumed over long periods, it can lead to increased risk of colon and stomach cancer, according to the National Cancer Institute. Such pollution can also be harmful to babies and pregnant

women, causing oxygen deprivation that can lead to miscarriages and methemoglobinemia or "blue baby syndrome," according to the Oregon Health Authority.

Comments regarding the revised water permit can be emailed to Patty Isaak, DEQ's water quality permit coordinator at patty.isaak@deq.oregon.gov. All comments are due by 5 p.m. Friday, May 20.

After that round of comments, the agency will propose an updated permit and possibly allow comment on that.

The port's discharge violations are the result of accumulating more water than it can store as it's expanded over the years.

The revised permit would allow the port to add about 1,600 acres to its discharge program.

"The additional acreage spreads out the wastewater nutrients onto more crop fields, reducing likelihood of unused nitrate leaching to groundwater if properly managed," the DEQ said in its permit summary.

The revisions would require the port to conduct more soil and groundwater quality monitoring, reduce discharges in nongrowing seasons and devise a plan to clean existing groundwater contamination.

The port is building the first of three anaerobic digesters that will help treat some of the water-borne nitrate turning it to ammonia, which is easier for crops to take up and could lead to less nitrate leaching into the groundwater.

Morrow County is the Lower Umatilla Basin, which the DEQ has deemed a Groundwater Management Area since the early 1990s due to high levels of nitrate in the water.

Rodriguez selected as West Park principal

Hermiston Herald

West Park Elementary will have a new principal, according to the Hermiston School District.

Effective July 1, Juan Rodriguez will step into the position. The Armand Larive Middle School assistant principal, Rodriguez is the replacement for the depart-

ing Kevin Headings.

Headings is leaving West Park to take up a new job as the superintendent of the Pendleton School District.

According to the HSD announcement, which was made on the district's website, the incoming principal went through the



Rodriguez

Hermiston school system and graduated from Hermiston High School in 2005. He was hired in 2010 as an HHS teacher and moved into administration at ALMS in 2019.

"Now two years through a global pandemic, HSD continues to focus on the

future, our students," Tricia Mooney, Hermiston superintendent, said.

"Planning for next school year, it is critical that the building principals share the same values and passion for Hermiston students. Mr. Rodriguez is familiar with district systems and has established relationships throughout the community."

Hermiston hosts League of Cities conference

Hermiston Herald

For anyone wondering why Hermiston is experiencing an influx of new guests, there is a reason. Officials from around Oregon are converging on Hermiston this week to see what they can learn from this community and from one another.

Held Thursday and Friday, April 21 and 22, the LOC conference is at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center in Hermiston.

Registration is closed, but government officials may still register at the event.

In a video promoting the League of Oregon Cities' Local Government Spring Conference, Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann welcomes visiting government leaders.

"I'll see you there," he said.

Registered attendees include 153 city leaders representing 77 communities from across the state, according to the press release.

Participating city officials include mayors, city councilors, city managers, city administrators, city recorders, police chiefs and finance directors.

All of Hermiston's city councilors said they would be among the city offi-

cially who would attend the conference.

Byron Smith, Hermiston city manager, and Mark Morgan, Hermiston assistant city manager, will be among the participants.

Tours will give attendees a look at regional water projects and community sites made possible through fundraising.

During the two-day event, 15 training workshops will be offered. Topics include infrastructure funding, recruitment and retention, housing and homelessness, cyber security, diversity, equity and inclusion; and property tax reform.

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5. **Umatilla County** - Hwy 395 N.
(next to transfer station)
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8. **Boardman** - NW Columbia Ave

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