Oregon Water Coalition
Member Newsletter

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Water proponents, politicians divided over annual fee proposal

At a recent ceremony in Portland, Sens. Jackie Dingfelder, D-Portland, and Bill Hansell, R-Pendleton, stood side-by-side in a show of bipartisan support for a plan to tap Columbia River water for irrigation in a way that protects fish.

They might want to relish the moment. The two are lining up on opposite sides of a bill to establish a water right management fee.

In a press conference earlier this year, Dingfelder highlighted the fee as a priority this session as she seeks to wean the Oregon Water Resources Department off its dependence on general funds.

Senate Bill 217 would establish an annual fee of $100 per water right and cap the amount any one entity would pay at $1,000.

"This would ensure a stable funding, not just for the Water Resources Department," Dingfelder said, "but for our programs to properly manage our water supplies."

SB217 has been assigned to the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee, which Dingfelder chairs.

Hansell, who is a member of the committee, said he believes the department should lean on general funds for its budget.

"My preference is to get more general fund money (for the department)," Hansell said. "My concern is if we start moving somebody to a fee-based operation, then the ability to maintain or increase general fund appropriations becomes less and less likely.

"I think it is going to be a real tough sell to start funding the department through fees," he said. "I would rather work on trying to keep them whole through the general fund budget, because (water use and protection) is a public good, a state responsibility."

In highlighting the fee at the Oregon Conservation Network press conference in February, Dingfelder said fees currently paid by water right holders are insufficient to cover the expense of managing the state's 85,000 water rights.

"Right now," she said, "the only fee you pay is when you do an actual transaction with the state, and that means, when you're applying for a water right, when you're transferring or perfecting a water right. And once you've done that, there is no fee. And we all know that water is more valuable than that."

Dingfelder said funds from the fees would be used "to properly manage Oregon's waterways, to ensure that field staff are in place to resolve conflicts between water rights holders" and to collect and analyze water data.

"We have been collecting data," she said, "but we don't have the staff to interpret it. So how do we know if we are managing our water systems wisely if we can't do the data analysis?"

Dingfelder said revenue from the fees also could be used to enhance groundwater monitoring in Oregon.

It appears Dingfelder, who has 12 years of experience as a state lawmaker, and Hansell, a freshman lawmaker with 30 years of experience as a county commissioner, do have some common ground. Both, for example, believe water is a key to economic development in Oregon.

"Water is the economic engine of this state," Dingfelder said. "If we don't have water, we can't manufacture, we can't grow crops, we can't provide important resources for our communities."

Hansell, likewise, said getting water for growers in his Senate district is one of his priorities this session.

"I am going to promote working on a program to use more of the Columbia River water, work on storage," he said. "We could be an oasis, we could be the Imperial Valley of California. We have the growing season. We have the land available, but it is in a low rainfall area. We've got to be able to irrigate."

Mitch Lies, Capital Press, 3/1/2013

Taskforce signs cooperative agreement on Eastern Oregon water projects

Gov. John Kitzhaber on Feb. 15 announced that a taskforce of diverse interests has reached agreement on a strategy to increase irrigation supplies for Eastern Oregon farmers while protecting fish.

"This strategy ... will provide benefits for farmers in the Umatilla Basin and fish in the Columbia River," Kitzhaber said. "It will capture additional stored water when the fish don't need it, and release that water when the fish and the farmers do need it."

To mark the first time environmentalists, tribes and farmers have aligned behind a strategy for managing the Columbia River water, Kitzhaber convened a ceremony where parties to the agreement signed a declaration of cooperation.

"This kind of collaborative project, supporting both agriculture and fisheries in the Umatilla Basin, is a good example of what we need to do to boost the economy in rural Oregon," Kitzhaber said at the ceremony.

"This is a big deal to all of us," said Umatilla County Commissioner Dennis Doherty, a co-convenor of the taskforce.

"We are very, very proud that together we produced consensus on nine project recommendations," Doherty said.

"These together are certainly sufficient to raise the hopes in our basin, without raising unrealistic expectations," he said.

"What we laid down is more than enough to assure that what we have started today will continue tomorrow," Doherty said.

Steve Greenwood, project manager for the taskforce and a Portland State University professor, said the agreement could result in additional irrigation supplies as soon as this summer.

Greenwood said the state will be working on leasing water rights with the Washington Trust Water Rights Program for 1,500 acre-feet of water from the Port of Walla Walla.

"We're hoping that we can maybe cut a deal that will allow that water to be used as early as this season," Greenwood said. Greenwood said the state also hopes within a month to start putting together a work plan for studying a project to repair the Wallowa Dam, one of the taskforce's nine project recommendations.

Repairing the concrete dam will allow the Association Ditch Co., which owns the dam, to store more water behind it.

Other projects agreed upon by the taskforce include:

- Study the possibility of building new reservoir storage in Juniper Canyon. The potential storage is estimated at 49,000 acre-feet of water, which would be pumped from the Columbia during winter months.
- Build on the current aquifer recovery project being conducted by the Umatilla Basin Water Commission in conjunction with the Westland Irrigation District.
- Lease unused, developed Washington water rights.
- Develop a Umatilla Basin water bank and brokerage.
- Invest in water conservation measures in the Wallowa Basin to potentially provide additional water and potential irrigation in the Umatilla Basin.
- Develop an interstate agreement with Washington to protect water as it flows through that state for potential benefit to Oregon users.
- Discuss the potential for joint investments with Washington for winter storage and release during the summer.

Development of the projects is contingent on legislative support for funding that Kitzhaber has proposed in his budget, said Richard Whitman, Kitzhaber's natural resources policy adviser.

"No legislation is required to implement the projects that have been agreed to by this group," he said, "but we do need state funding to assist with this work and continue moving these projects forward."

Sen. Jackie Dingfelder, D-Portland, chair of the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Commission, said she is supportive of the projects.

"We are going to have some challenges ahead," Dingfelder said. "Funding is always a challenge as we have to meet multiple goals in the legislative process. But

certainly having all of you working together moving forward is helpful to us as we try to figure out bipartisan and bicameral support to move this important project forward," she said.

The governor has proposed allocating $1 million to $2 million to the projects as part of $22 million proposed for statewide water development projects, Whitman said. The funding is for staffing at the Oregon Water Resources Department to help advance the recommendations, to pay for feasibility studies and provide incentives for conservation projects in the Wallowa Basin, Whitman said.

Mitch Lies, Capital Press, 3/1/2013

Washington State legislation would protect farmers who conserve water

Farmers who could lose their water rights because they changed to more efficient irrigation methods 20 to 30 years ago would get relief under a bill introduced by Rep. Vincent Buys, R-Lynden.

House Bill 1438 would provide relief primarily for raspberry and blueberry growers in Whatcom County, Wash., who switched from overhead to microdrip irrigation in the 1980s but did not file paperwork on the change.

Filing today would result in complications that could lead to the loss of water rights, Bill Clark, of Whatcom Farm Friends, told the state House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.

The bill directs the Department of Ecology to base its decisions on water rights changes on the statutory rules in place at the time the change of use occurred and not when the application for the change is made. Past provisions would be considered if:

- The applicant implemented the change prior to making the application.
- The change in use resulted from the use of a efficient micro-irrigation technology.
- The change of use resulted in the beneficial use of the water for irrigation.

Maia Bellon, water resources program manager at Ecology, said her agency supports the bill's intent and will work with Buys and stakeholders on a pilot bill. However, she said, "We have a de facto change policy to authorize changes case by case, so we don't impair senior water right holders."

Jack Field of the Washington Cattlemen's Association said he wants to make sure there are no unintended consequences to stock watering. Among those opposing HB1438 was Darcy Nonemacher, speaking for the Washington Environmental Council.

"Any time you go back in time to change a decision point in our water rights system, it gets very messy and very complicated about what does that mean for junior water rights if there is a relinquishment issue or if there's illegal water use," Nonemacher said. She said she opposes "anything that perpetuates confusion."

Bruce Wishart of the Sierra Club said the bill appears to provide amnesty for individuals who have conducted conservation without having to apply for a change.

"This is not a good precedent," he said. "We encourage conservation, but want people to go through appropriate processes."

Steve Brown, Capital Press, 2/15/2013

Climate assessment: near 100% chance NW summer flow reductions by 2050

"Evidence for climate change abounds, from the top of the atmosphere to the depths of the oceans. This evidence has been compiled by scientists and engineers from around the world, using satellites, weather balloons, thermometers, buoys, and other observing systems," according to a new report prepared for the U.S. government with the contributions of more than 1,000 individuals.

"The sum total of this evidence tells an unambiguous story: the planet is warming," the new "National Climate Assessment" says. Much of that climate change is driven by humans with the ever-increasing emission of gases into the atmosphere, and could only likely be slowed by a reduction in such emissions, the report says.

Climate change, as projected by scientists, means significant changes for human life and the environmental processes that support it, according to a new report.

The Pacific Northwest, with its heavy reliance on the timing and quantity of water deliveries from Mother Nature, figures to be affected considerably by a warming climate.

Some of the key messages noted by authors of the Northwest section of the report are that:

- Changes in the timing of streamflow related to changing snowmelt are already observed and will continue, reducing the supply of water for many competing demands and causing far-reaching ecological and socioeconomic consequences.

- In the coastal zone, the effects of erosion, inundation, threats to infrastructure and habitat, and increasing ocean acidity collectively pose a major threat to the region.

- The combined impact of increasing wildfire, insect outbreaks, and diseases is virtually certain to cause additional forest mortality by the 2040s and long-term transformation of forest landscapes. Almost complete loss of subalpine forests is expected by the 2080s.

- While the agriculture sector's technical ability to adapt to changing conditions can offset some of the adverse impacts of a changing climate, there remain critical sector-specific concerns with respect to costs of adaptation, development of more climate resilient technologies and management, and availability and timing of water.

The Northwest section was authored by experts from Oregon State University and the University of Washington, as well as the University of Idaho, the Idaho Department of Water Resources, the National Wildlife Federation and the Cascadia Consulting Group.

"Reservoir systems have multiple objectives, including irrigation, municipal and industrial use, hydropower production, flood control, and preserving fish habitat. Modeling studies indicate, with near 100 percent likelihood, that reductions in summer flow will occur by 2050 in basins with significant snowmelt," according to the report's Northwest chapter. The report cites numerous studies.

"Combined with summer increases in heat-driven electric power demand for cooling and evaporative demand from crops and forests, these reduced flows will require tradeoffs among objectives of the whole system of reservoirs.

"For example, reductions in hydropower production of as much as 20 percent by the 2080s could be required to preserve in-stream flow targets for fish in the Columbia River basin," the report says. "Springtime irrigation diversions increased between 1970 and 2007 in the Snake River basin, as earlier snowmelt led to reduced spring soil moisture. In the absence of adaptation, annual hydropower production is much more likely to decrease than to increase; economic impacts of hydropower changes could be substantial, on the order of hundreds of millions of dollars per year.

"Several aspects of hydrologic change, such as increased flooding in mixed rain-snow basins, region-wide increased winter flows and summer temperatures, and decreased summer flows, will threaten many freshwater species, particularly salmon, steelhead, and trout. Rising temperatures will increase disease and/or mortality in several iconic salmon species, including spring/summer chinook and sockeye, especially in the interior Columbia and Snake River basins," the report says, although some streams are less sensitive to warming because of the temperature buffering provided by snowmelt and groundwater. By the 2080s, suitable habitat for the four trout species of the interior western U.S. is projected to decline 47 percent on average compared to 1978-97."

The National Climate Assessment was prepared for a committee of independent advisers to the U.S. government. The 400-page document is a synthesis of scientists' current understanding of climate change and its potential impacts in the United States.

The Global Change Research Act of 1990 calls for an NCA to be produced at least every four years; the last came out in 2009.

The draft NCA is a scientific document -- not a policy document -- and does not make recommendations regarding actions that might be taken in response to climate change, according to a blog posted on the White House web site by John P. Holdren, assistant to the president and director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, and Jane Lubchenco, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

"Today is the first time the government has been presented with this draft and the administration will be one of a number of entities that will begin the process of reviewing it. When completed about a year from now, however – after considerable inputs from the public and expert reviewers -- it will represent the most thorough, rigorous, and transparent assessment ever of climate change and its U.S. impacts."

The new NCA draft version reflects the efforts of individuals from the public and private sectors and academia

who have been compiling data since 2010.

A public review period started Jan. 14. Comments will be accepted through April 12.

The document will also be reviewed by the National Academies.

Ultimately, towards the end of this year, a final NCA will be presented to the United States Global Change Research Program, which coordinates global-change research activities across the federal government. USGCRP will use the assessment to help pinpoint knowledge gaps and develop research priorities.

The blog stresses that the NCA is expected to be used widely by public and private stakeholders who need information about climate change in order to thrive -- from farmers deciding which crops to grow, to city planners deciding the diameter of new storm sewers they are replacing, to electric utilities and regulators pondering how to protect the power grid.

To maximize its practical usefulness, the draft document breaks down the impacts of climate change across eight regions of the United States and more than a dozen sectors of the U.S. economy and society, including: energy, transportation, agriculture, health, urban infrastructure, coastal zone development, and water resources.

While the specific findings of the draft NCA are still subject to revision in response to inputs from the public, the National Academies, and the 13 federal departments and agencies that make up the USGCRP, the document released Jan. 11 sets a new standard of scientific integrity, user relevance, and stakeholder inclusiveness, the Holdren-Lubchenco blog says.

It was developed with input from more than 240 contributing authors under the leadership of 60 independent expert advisors. More than 1,000 volunteers across the nation helped build it from the ground-up by organizing regional workshops and contributing technical reports.

In a parallel effort, USGCRP recently launched "NCAnet," a growing network of more than 60 stakeholder organizations committed to engaging broad and diverse audiences on the topic.

To access the draft National Climate Assessment, please visit **www.ncadac.globalchange.gov**.

Columbia Basin Bulletin, 1/25/2013

Odessa project progress shared, Bureau must apply for secondary permit

A leader of the efforts to expand the federal Columbia Basin Project expects work to be finished within 10 years after construction starts.

"Part of it goes to how quickly the farmers in the different systems can organize themselves and how much construction you can handle at any one time," said Mike Schwisow, director of government affairs for the Columbia Basin Development League.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation is waiting for a final record of decision from the regional director on the preferred delivery method, estimated to cost $730 million, and bring water to 70,000 acres of farmland. It would divert 164,000 acre-feet of water from the river.

In its biological opinion, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service determined the project would "adversely affect but not jeopardize" the surrounding environment.

"The key words are 'not jeopardize,'" Schwisow said. "If they'd say 'jeopardy,' we're done."

Federal agencies are prohibited from taking any action that would jeopardize the continued existence of a listed species under the Endangered Species Act.

The bureau must apply for a secondary permit for water storage. The permit has been drafted and reviewed by stakeholder organization attorneys, Schwisow said.

Former Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire included $31.7 million in her budget to initiate the expansion.

The East Columbia Basin Irrigation District is exploring methods for revenue bond financing of the pipeline system.

Expansion of the East Low Canal would make development easier, Schwisow said, giving the ability to serve all pipelines throughout the canal. Currently, the canal is built to full capacity north of Interstate 90, but built to half-capacity south of the interstate.

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee recently voiced support for the Odessa project during a question-and answer session

for House Bill 1414, which relates to Yakima River Basin water management, Schwisow said. "It indicates it's on the governor's office's radar," Schwisow said. "He's identified (declining aquifer levels) as a problem his office wants to solve."

Loss of irrigation water could cost $1.6 billion per year in lost revenue, according to Schwisow.

Matthew Weaver, Capital Press, 2/8/2013

Are wild Salmon numbers increasing? 'State of the Salmon' report mixed

The Washington State Salmon Recovery Funding Board has released its 2012 biennial "State of the Salmon in Watersheds" report and with it launched a new, interactive web site that allows people to see how salmon are doing in their community's streams and rivers.

The seventh biennial report serves as a tool to summarize achievements, track salmon recovery progress through common indicators, and identify data gaps that need to be filled to help inform efforts to boost salmon and steelhead populations.

This site is intended for several audiences: those who would like a summary or snapshot of the information, and others who enjoy digging deeper to find the details, according to a press release by the state's Recreation and Conservation Office.

From the web site's home page users will be able to find paths to both statewide and regional information, as well as links to indicators of salmon recovery.

"For the first time, you can sit at your computer at home and learn about whether the number of salmon are increasing or decreasing in your county, if the rivers and streams in your area are too polluted or too warm for salmon, and what's being done to make things better. It's the first web site in Washington that allows people to see how the state's investment in salmon recovery is working," Cottingham said.

The web site puts online what previously was available as a printed biennial report to the Legislature and provides more extensive maps and data, pulled from many state and local organizations.

"Washington state has been investing in salmon recovery for more than a decade, and we are starting to see some positive effects," Cottingham said. "In some areas of the state salmon populations are increasing.

"But we still have a long way to go until all listed species of salmon are recovered enough to be removed from the federal Endangered Species Act list. It took us generations to decimate our salmon and it will take equally long to recover them. Fortunately, Washington is in a good position to do the hard work necessary."

"One thing we have learned is that what is good for salmon is also good for communities," Cottingham said.

Recent Oregon studies showed that every $1 million spent on watershed restoration results in 15-33 new or sustained jobs, $2.2 million to $2.5 million in total economic activity, and that 80 percent of grant money is spent in the county where the project was located.

Using the Oregon formula, salmon recovery funding is expected to have supported more than 4,400 new or sustained jobs and more than $640 million in total economic activity in Washington.

"This report makes it clear that we have accomplished much but still have a long way to go," Cottingham said.

"Climate change, development to accommodate the state's growing population, and decreasing funding, are the most serious threats for salmon recovery in the future. It's up to all of us to ensure that we have enough funding, enough people, and enough resources to continue this work. It's so important if we are to ensure the iconic salmon survive." To see the full report and web site, visit:

www.StateofSalmon.wa.gov.

The SRF Board was created in 1999 by the Washington Legislature to direct state-funded grants for work to protect or restore salmon habitat and assist related activities. The board is composed of five citizens appointed by the governor, and representatives of five state natural resource agencies.

Information about the Salmon Recovery Funding Board can be found at:

www.rco.wa.gov.

Columbia Basin Bulletin, 1/25/2013

Study shows fish passage not significantly delayed at Umatilla diversions

Fisheries biologists from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation were scheduled March 9 to present findings from a steelhead radio tracking study at the Pendleton Sportsman show.

The Umatilla Tribes have completed four years of a five-year radio telemetry study to evaluate upstream passage of adult salmon and steelhead in the Umatilla River Basin. The primary objectives were to evaluate adult passage of summer steelhead and spring and fall chinook salmon past major diversion dams on the lower Umatilla River, and to determine holding and spawning locations of these fish in the river basin.

Tribal biologists collaborated with Kinsy Frick from the National Marine Fisheries Service on the telemetry project, which is one of the major components of the Umatilla Basin Natural Production Monitoring and Evaluation Project spearheaded by Craig Contor, the project leader for the Umatilla Tribes Fisheries Program.

The study evaluated adult salmon and steelhead passage at all major diversions for three years, 2009-2011. Two additional years of evaluation for steelhead will be completed this June. Managers also need updated information on where hatchery and wild steelhead were spawning in the Umatilla Basin.

To date, 636 steelhead have been tagged at Three Mile Falls Dam on the lower Umatilla River. Tags were placed in the fishes' stomachs. By recovering tags, biologists were able to tag 336 spring and fall chinook for additional evaluation. Most tags were used multiple times. Some tags were placed in as many as six different fish. "We are grateful to the fishermen that returned tags, and the farmers and rancher that granted access for us to track fish and recover used tags," Contor said.

Automated telemetry receivers were operated continuously at each of the major diversion dams to monitor fish passage through fish ladders, spillway slots, and over the dam crests. Mobile tracking was conducted from trucks and boats outfitted with antennas. Tracking and tag was also conducted on foot on public land and on private land with permission. Aerial tracking was conducted over the streams in the foothills and the Blue Mountains.

Results to date have shown that radio tagged adult salmon and steelhead were not significantly delayed at any of the diversions on the mainstem of the Umatilla River during the study., The modifications at Feed Canal Dam in 2008 successfully enhanced passage. The current passage facilities and operations provide adequate passage for adult salmon and steelhead, Contor said.

The study also documented upstream distribution of steelhead and showed that a larger than expected number of fish did not leave the mainstem during the spawning season. The remainder moved into the headwater tributaries including Birch Creek, Butter Creek, Wildhorse Creek and Meacham Creek.

"While steelhead are known to explore, we didn't expect to see steelhead in those stream given the current status of the habitat," Contor said.

Columbia Basin Bulletin, 3/1/2013

PFMC report shows potential for good ocean fishing, strong fall Chinook

Fishing prospects this summer off the coasts of California, Oregon and Washington would appear to be quite rosy, due to forecasts of large runs of fall chinook headed to the Columbia River, the Klamath River and other spawning destinations.

Those forecasts are assembled in a new report made available by the Pacific Fisheries Management Council entitled "Preseason Report I: Stock Abundance Analysis and Environmental Assessment Part 1 for 2013 Ocean Salmon Fishery Regulations."

The report is the second in an annual series of four reports prepared by the Salmon Technical Team of the PFMC to document and help guide commercial and sport salmon fishery management off the coasts of Washington, Oregon, and California.

The new report focuses on chinook, coho, and pink salmon stocks that have been important in determining Council fisheries in recent years, and on stocks listed under the Endangered Species Act with established National Marine Fisheries Service ESA consultation standards. The report can be found at:

www.pcouncil.org.

Columbia Basin Bulletin, 3/1/2013

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