



NEWS

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Renewed Funding for Irrigation Modernization in Central Oregon Creates Jobs and Increases Drought Resilience Heading Into a Challenging 2020-2021

The potential for more piping projects in the Deschutes and Crooked River Basins could provide a major conservation and economic boon as rural communities face a looming drought and the unemployment crisis of the Covid-19 shutdown.

PRINEVILLE, Ore. (June 12, 2020)

Recent storms have ripped through Central Oregon, damaging crops and flooding the complicated system of thirty aging pumps that Ochoco Irrigation District (OID) relies upon to get water to over 20,000 acres of farm land in the Prineville area. With severe drought conditions on the horizon and soaring unemployment levels due to the Covid-19 shutdown, irrigation modernization efforts in several Central Oregon districts mark a bright spot for job creation, water conservation and agricultural success.

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The Natural Resources Conservation Service Watershed Planning and Flood Prevention Program, spearheaded in Oregon by Senator Merkley, aims to inject much needed capital into shovel-ready projects that will benefit farms, fish and the regional economy.

“As we face the possibility of another devastating drought and continue to grapple with the economic fallout caused by the coronavirus crisis, we should also do everything we can to lay a strong foundation to rebuild a prosperous future,” **said Oregon’s U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley.** “Thankfully, local stakeholders recognized a while back that this kind of project helps all of those things at once, conserving water, creating jobs, and building for tomorrow. I’m glad we’re working together to invest in our future while getting through the challenges of the present.”

Two challenges face Central Oregon communities in 2020: drought and a potential recession. Snowpack, the main source for the area’s water, is at 61% for the Deschutes and Crooked River basins.

“In addition to severely impacting rivers and streams, dry years present enormous challenges for rural communities,” **explained Natasha Bellis, Program Manager for the Deschutes River**

Conservancy. In the Crooked River basin, these challenges are exacerbated by an inefficient water delivery system. “The Deschutes River Conservancy and OID have been working together to develop innovative projects, such as water source switches and dry-year leasing.” Bellis added. These projects will help restore streamflow to the Crooked River and its tributaries, while providing OID and its patrons with more flexibility in water management.

Additionally, the economic impact of the Covid-19 shutdown could have long-term impacts on rural communities. The Great Recession of 2007-2008 hit rural employment hardest; it took over 10 years for rural jobs to recover to pre-Recession levels. Research indicates that every 1 job in agriculture helps support 1.5 to 2.5 jobs in the overall economy and every \$1 in farm output helps support \$1.5 to \$2.5 in total economic output.

Luckily for the Ochoco Irrigation District, a main pump valve broke just as a rain system moved through Central Oregon. No farmers were left dry when the district was forced to shut down to replace the valve. But, like many irrigation districts, Ochoco’s 60-year-old pumping system is wearing down, and a failure during peak summer heat could be catastrophic to downstream patrons.

“With aging infrastructure,” **says Ochoco District manager Bruce Scanlon**, “it’s more and more difficult to maintain a high level of efficiency and service. It’s just a reality. The PL-566 funding is an opportunity for Ochoco to get a transplant and hit reset.”

Nearby modernization projects have proven successful for farmers, fisheries and regional job creation. The Tumalo Irrigation District’s conversion of its entire 68 miles of open canals and laterals to gravity pressurized piping supported over 135 jobs between October 2019 and April 2020. Renewed construction in fall 2020 to pipe 12,837 linear feet of the Columbia Southern lateral will create a commensurate amount of jobs in the district. Overall, Tumalo’s modernization efforts are conserving 48cfs of Deschutes River water per year.

“Big thanks to Sen. Merkley and his team for directing PL-566 funds to Central Oregon,” **says Ken Rieck, Tumalo Irrigation District manager**. “Our piping and modernization work in late 2020 and into 2021 will once-again generate over 100 prevailing wage jobs, and we’ll devote 100% of publicly owned conserved water back into streams.”

The smaller Swalley Irrigation District will pipe roughly 6,650 feet of its Main Canal in 2020, meaning half of the district’s 28.1 miles of main canal and laterals will be piped. This improvement will return 56cfs to the Deschutes River (45% of the overall diversion).

Energy Trust of Oregon and Farmer’s Conservation Alliance are collaborating with irrigation districts across Oregon and western states to help navigate the application process for PL-566 funding. Part of that work is also evaluating the broader potential benefits that can be realized.

“Irrigation modernization projects are complex, multiyear efforts that require substantial investments, yet they can provide communities with durable clean energy and economic and environmental benefits for years to come.” **says Dave Moldal, Senior Program Manager at Energy Trust of Oregon**. “Incorporating small-scale distributed generation as part of irrigation modernization can help meet renewable energy goals, build upon the strength of the overall electrical grid and increase community resiliency across the region.”

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Farmers Conservation Alliance (FCA®) is a 501c3 nonprofit organization that is championing irrigation modernization strategies to achieve agricultural resilience and conservation benefits. Formed in 2005, FCA is

currently partnering with farmers throughout the west to install fish screens and develop and implement customized approaches for broad-scale irrigation modernization. Learn more at fcsolutions.org

Energy Trust of Oregon is an independent nonprofit organization dedicated to helping utility customers benefit from saving energy and generating renewable power. Our services, cash incentives and solutions have helped participating customers of Portland General Electric, Pacific Power, NW Natural and Cascade Natural Gas save nearly \$1.9 billion on their energy bills since 2002.