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Federal money flows into Deschutes Basin piping projects

USDA-backed project gets going near Tumalo, others planned

With the summer irrigation season winding down and the winter snowfall still on the horizon, several irrigation districts in the Deschutes Basin are planning or breaking ground on ambitious piping projects, armed with a sizable cache of federal money.

At the beginning of October, Tumalo Irrigation District broke ground on the first phase of a project that would install enclosed pipes in the remainder of the irrigation district's open-air canals, with the help of around \$30 million secured by the U.S. Senate Appropriations Agriculture Subcommittee from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., a ranking member on the committee, praised the funding for helping the district conserve water for farmers and protect habitat within the basin.

"I am pleased that through perseverance and bipartisan collaboration, rural Oregon will receive an economic and environmental boon," Merkley said in a prepared statement.

Additionally, Central Oregon Irrigation District, Swalley Irrigation District and Lone Pine Irrigation District are each planning similar projects, according to Tom Makowski, assistant state conservationist for watershed resources and planning for the National Resources Conservation Service, an agency within the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Makowski said the agency has secured around \$50 million for projects spread throughout the basin over the next five years.

"We see this as a good thing for agriculture," Makowski said. "It's a good return on our investment."

Makowski said the projects are part of a larger effort to replace the leaky canals spread across the Deschutes Basin with enclosed pipes, a move he says will keep much-needed water in the basin's rivers and reservoirs, providing habitat for wildlife and supporting Central Oregon in the face of low snowpacks and population growth.

"It's water, and it's the West," Makowski said. "There's gonna be more demand."

Several irrigation districts in the Deschutes Basin are no stranger to piping their canals, which in some areas are nearly a century old. Both Tumalo and Three Sisters irrigation districts began piping canals about 15 years ago in order to save water. More recently, COID piped more than 3,000 feet of its canal near Brookwood Boulevard in Bend last winter, using grants from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to supplement the project cost.

Still, Makowski said this slate of projects represents the first time the NRCS has participated in piping projects in the Deschutes Basin since 2016, when a settlement regarding the Oregon spotted frog mandated that water levels in the Deschutes Basin not fall below certain thresholds. He added that the settlement prompted irrigation districts to look more seriously at water conservation.

“If (the frogs) needed more water, the districts were the ones who were going to get cut,” Makowski said.

Kenneth Rieck, manager of Tumalo Irrigation District, said years of preparation helped the district begin working as soon as its irrigation season ended at the end of September.

“Once the water was out of the canals, we just dove right in,” Rieck said.

Rieck added that the first phase of the project will install pipe in 8,400 feet of canal managed by the district. He said the project will reduce the amount of water lost to leakage, allowing the irrigation district to return 7 cubic feet per second to the basin. Ultimately, the district hopes to pipe its entire system, including about 65 miles of smaller canals.

“This is the largest project, in length and dollars, that we’ve attempted,” Rieck said.

The first phase is projected to cost \$6.7 million, with the national conservation service covering \$5 million, according to Makowski. Makowski noted that helping to fund irrigation projects fits the USDA’s mandate to support agriculture in local communities.

Local and state environmental groups praised the approach as well. Jim McCarthy, communications director for WaterWatch of Oregon, said piping projects are designed to work in tandem with efforts by farmers to conserve water on their own properties and efforts to share water between irrigation districts. McCarthy added that returning even relatively small amounts of water to streams and rivers can help fish and other animals access areas of the basin that they may not have been able to otherwise.

“Connectivity is a huge issue, and 5 (cubic feet per second) can provide that connectivity in certain areas,” McCarthy said.

Gail Snyder, executive director for the Bend-based environmental group Coalition for the Deschutes, said it becomes easier to implement other conservation methods once the canals are piped. With more water in the system, Snyder said farmers become more willing and able to conserve water on their end. Additionally, irrigation districts with senior water rights become less reluctant to share with junior water right-holders when there’s more water available.

“We need all the tools available to us to conserve water so we can restore the river,” she said.