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# **Merkley tours irrigation improvements, supports 're-plumbing' Central Oregon**

## **Oregon senator helps secure funding going toward new piping**

Many of the irrigation districts operating in the Deschutes Basin have worked for years to replace leaky, open-air canals with pipelines and make other improvements aimed at conserving water.

With federal money continuing to pour in, an event on Tuesday morning, featuring speeches from Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., and Matt Lohr, chief of the National Resources Conservation Service, highlighted a couple of those improvements that are coming to fruition.

"Let's seize every one of those opportunities, and make our rural economy stronger," Merkley told a standing room-only crowd of farmers, environmentalists and other stakeholders at a Three Sisters Irrigation District facility on Tuesday.

They had come to see Merkley, and local irrigation district managers, cut the ribbons on two new infrastructure improvements: a \$30 million federal investment in a massive Tumalo Irrigation District piping project and four new hydro turbines built by Three Sisters Irrigation District.

The projects represent two of the highest-profile efforts to modernize an aging network of canals and other irrigation infrastructure, with significant water and energy savings expected to follow. Speakers pointed to a diverse network of agencies, including the Farmers Conservation Alliance and the Energy Trust of Oregon, as providing a framework to get these and other irrigation projects off the ground.

"It has been a long, incredible journey, but now it's going basinwide," said Marc Thalacker, Three Sisters Irrigation District manager.

Piping Central Oregon's open-air canals, some of which are nearly a century old, has been a key strategy for saving water throughout the Deschutes Basin. On average, about half of the water diverted into Central Oregon's canals for farmers is lost to evaporation or seepage. Thalacker said piping the canals allows the district to divert less water, because a much higher percentage reaches the farmers served by the district.

"We used to divert a cup of water and deliver half a cup," he said. "And now, we're able to divert three-quarters of a cup, and deliver three-quarters of a cup."

Last fall, Merkley spearheaded an effort, through the U.S. Senate Appropriations Agriculture Subcommittee, to secure \$30 million that could go toward Tumalo Irrigation District's piping efforts. During his speech Tuesday, Merkley said more federal money is on the way to the Deschutes Basin over the next two years.

"As long as I'm on that committee, I'm going to do everything I can to sustain it and help the re-plumbing of irrigation in Central Oregon," Merkley said.

Over time, Tumalo Irrigation District intends to pipe its entire system, including around 65 miles of secondary canals. Once the long-term piping project is completed, the district estimates that will conserve 48 cubic feet per second of water, enough to cover more than 95 acres with a foot of water every day.

Separately, Merkley and other representatives toured a new project, featuring four new hydro turbines, completed by Three Sisters Irrigation District. Thalacker said the project — known as the Watson Micro Hydro Demonstration Project — allows the district to generate more green electricity through hydropower, while showcasing different types of turbines that can be used in hydropower projects throughout the region.

Thalacker said Three Sisters has already piped more than 90 percent of its 64-mile system of canals, and the district put in valves designed to reduce the pressure of the water before it reaches a farm. The turbines could then be installed in front of the valves to generate electricity.

Thalacker said the district intends to sell the energy it generates to PacifiCorp, providing the utility with clean energy. Additionally, Thalacker said farmers working the utility will save about 9 million kilowatt hours, enough to power about 750 Oregon homes per year.

“It’s a win for the community; it’s a win for everybody,” he said.

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