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Tumalo piping project takes another step forward

Piping all the irrigation canals would return more water to Tumalo and Crescent creeks.

Tumalo Irrigation District is moving forward on an ambitious project to pipe its entire network of canals, thanks to an influx of federal and state money.

The Oregon Water Resources Department announced last month it awarded just under \$5.3 million to seven projects aimed at water conservation and storage across Oregon through the Water Project Grants and Loans program. Tumalo Irrigation District received nearly \$1.3 million, the second-highest total among the projects selected.

Kenneth Rieck, manager of the irrigation district, said the grant will be used to help cover funding gaps in a long-term, \$44 million project that would convert the district's network of leaky, open-air canals with underground pipes.

The larger project, which includes converting the remainder of the 11.6-mile main canal along with more than 60 miles of smaller canals to underground pipe, is expected take 11 years to complete. Once the network is fully piped, it's expected to return 48 cubic feet of water per second to Tumalo and Crescent creeks, enough to cover more than 95 acres with a foot of water every day, Rieck said.

While the grant from the water resources department represents a relatively small portion of the overall cost, Rieck said, it works in concert with other state and federal grants, using money efficiently to return water to the Deschutes Basin.

“If we can use our money three times to do a piping project, that really makes a big difference,” he said.

Piping Central Oregon’s open-air irrigation canals, some of which are nearly a century old, has been a priority for saving water throughout the Deschutes Basin in recent years. This fall, the U.S. Senate Appropriations Agriculture Subcommittee, which includes Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., helped secure \$30 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that could allow Tumalo Irrigation District to resume piping its main canal once the irrigation season ended in October.

The federal investment still left the irrigation district \$14 million short of its larger funding goal. Rieck said the district will address the remaining funds piecemeal, breaking the project into seven phases and using a mix of grants from the water resources department and the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board.

Over the course of three annual funding cycles, the Water Project Grants and Loans program has contributed around \$20.5 million to water projects that provide economic, social, cultural or environmental benefits across the state.

Additionally, Tumalo Irrigation District received grants totaling \$650,000 over the last two years from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, said Greg Ciannella, regional program representative for the state agency. “We’re hoping we can

secure another funding opportunity before we get started,” Rieck added.

The irrigation district is planning to pipe 8,400 feet of canal before irrigation season begins in the spring, but Rieck said the district is already looking ahead to future phases. He added that he’s hoping to pipe the district’s primary 11.6-mile canal by 2020.

Once that happens, the irrigation district will shift its focus to the approximately 65-mile network of smaller canals that divert water to farmers.

With federal and state funding falling into place, a warm, dry winter could allow the district to work ahead.

“If we get a lot of snow down low in Bend, that really slows things down,” Rieck said.