

Water Supply Enhancement Has to Be Part of the Picture

By William D. Kennedy

Submitted to the Medford, Oregon *Mail-Tribune*

I read with interest the recent article about future water supplies in the Bear Creek Basin (“Tapped Out? Population growth expected to collide with a finite drinking-water supply for the Bear Creek Basin” *Mail Tribune*, May 22, 2005). I was surprised that this comprehensive story did not discuss opportunities to enhance water supplies as a means of addressing pressing future water needs. The conservation philosophy endorsed by the Medford Water Commission is commendable, but does anyone seriously believe that saving water without developing new supplies will meet the needs of 55,000 new customers in the next 25 years?

The situation in the Rogue River basin is typical of other areas of the West, where explosive population growth is placing unprecedented demands on the existing supplies while environmental demands are reducing the amount of water available for human use.

How will we meet the ever-increasing demand for water in the West? Improved conservation and efficiency by urban and agricultural water users is certainly part of the solution, but only part.

For some, the answer is to regard agriculture as “the reservoir” that will provide all the water necessary to meet urban and environmental needs. Water currently used for agriculture can be freed up for other uses by buying out farmers or forcing them to surrender their supplies through regulatory means. Best of all, some will say, this water can be “developed” without building dams.

This approach will destroy irrigated agriculture in the West. Jobs, homes and whole communities will be lost, and along with them that part of our national security that depends on a diverse and vibrant domestic food production industry.

Despite its harsh human and economic consequences, mining the agricultural water supply is, by default, our national water policy because we are not creating new supplies to meet the demands that are already upon us.

The Family Farm Alliance believes that it is possible to meet the needs of cities and the environment without sacrificing Western irrigated agriculture. To achieve that goal, we must expand the water supply in the West. There must be more water stored and available to farms and cities. Maintaining the status quo simply isn't sustainable in the face of unstoppable population growth.

Towards that end, the Family Farm Alliance last month released its “*Western Water Supply Initiative*” database, an effort to identify potential opportunities to enhance water

supplies for communities throughout the Western United States.

The purpose of the Alliance's *Western Water Supply Initiative* is to stimulate a dialogue on how to expand and enhance water supplies in a manner that is both timely and respectful of environmental values. Let me be clear about what the initiative is **not**. It is not a "plan" and it is not a list of projects recommended for implementation by The Family Farm Alliance. The Alliance does not endorse any specific project in the database.

The database contains projects that are ideas, others are projects in the planning stages, and some are ready to be implemented. They include groundwater as well as surface storage, new projects and improvements to old ones, large undertakings and small. Some would need federal funding, many would not.

One of the projects included in our data base is the Water for Irrigation, Streams, and Economy Project (WISE), a collaborative effort to improve the health of the Little Butte Creek and Bear Creek systems and increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the three local irrigation districts: Medford Irrigation District, Talent Irrigation District, and Rogue River Valley Irrigation District. Project objectives. The WISE Project will include the use of a combination of strategies including: piping and lining canals, increasing the storage capacity of selected reservoirs, and installation of a pumping system that will provide access to water that has been allocated for agricultural purposes. The delivery effectiveness and efficiency of the irrigation districts will be improved by piping and/or lining the irrigation canal system, increasing the storage capacity of selected local reservoirs, and using reclaimed water for irrigation purposes. Through all of these measures, more water will be available for management for irrigation and environmental instream purposes.

If you have questions about the Initiative, please feel free to contact office of the Family Farm Alliance, at 541-850-9007.

Bill Kennedy ranches in Klamath County, Oregon and Glenn County, California. He is the Chairman of the Board of the Family Farm Alliance, a grassroots organization of irrigation farmers, ranchers, irrigation districts and related interests in the 17 Western states served by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. For the past 16 years, The Alliance has had but one mission: to ensure an adequate and reliable supply of water for irrigated agriculture in the West.