

Deschutes County gives \$1.45 million to make irrigation more efficient

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The Deschutes County Commission has allocated nearly \$1.5 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funding to make irrigation systems more efficient.

The commission voted unanimously last week to give \$1.45 million to Deschutes River Conservancy, Deschutes Soil and Water Conservation District and Central Oregon Irrigation District to help jump-start projects that help reduce waste and conserve irrigation water, as well as provide pandemic relief to farmers.

The money couldn't come at a better time as Central Oregon enters its third year of extreme drought, said Kate Fitzpatrick, the executive director of the Deschutes River Conservancy.

Water shortages range between 200,000 to 400,000 acre-feet in the Upper Deschutes Water Basin, Fitzpatrick said. For context, Wickiup Reservoir holds about 200,000 acre-feet of water, she said.

"Impacts are being felt in every irrigation district in Deschutes County...so this really is a timely program," Fitzpatrick said in a meeting last week.

About \$1 million of the funding will go toward projects in the Terrebonne area, Fitzpatrick said. This is because COID is already investing \$30 million to pipe the Pilot Butte Canal between Redmond and Smith Rock, and improving irrigation technology near a large piping project helps improve water conservation outcomes, Fitzpatrick said.

About half of the 4,000 acres that are irrigated in this area are flood irrigated, which is a method in which farmers flow water down small trenches through their crops and is generally inefficient.

The goal is to target farmers still using flood irrigation and do projects to help reduce waste. Some

alternatives include piping lateral lines, which means piping the individual trenches that bring water to someone's parcel of land, and transitioning to a sprinkler system.

The goal is to reduce water demands by 40%, according to a presentation from the conservation district and river conservancy.

"If we are able to help these landowners make their systems more efficient, we can hopefully have water for longer periods of time through the summer for their crops," said Erin Kilcullen, the general manager of the conservation district, on Aug. 4.

About \$300,000 would go to farmers around the rest of the county, and the last \$150,000 would help pay for staffing to help manage these projects, Kilcullen said.

"We think this is a good investment for kind of a small price tag," Kilcullen said.

Farmers and ranchers were some of the many sectors that were adversely impacted by the pandemic, Kilcullen said. Many landowners rely heavily on agritourism, she said — like pumpkin patches and weddings — and took a financial hit when COVID-19 slowed tourism traffic.

Providing economic support to make irrigation systems more efficient can overall help farmers drive down costs and allow them to irrigate their fields for longer, Kilcullen said.

"We are thrilled that the County has invested in solving critical water issues in our basin. This funding will greatly accelerate ongoing water conservation work, helping our farmers and our rivers," Fitzpatrick said in an email. "We appreciate the County's leadership in recognizing that investing in water conservation benefits our community, our economy and our ecosystems."

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