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They call it 'Oasis Project' for a reason

Legislation holds promise of economic life in northeast Oregon high desert

This editorial goes out to two groups of people: First, the folks who do most of the working, playing and dying in northeast Oregon, and secondly, the group of lawmakers who soon will make a choice that will significantly affect everybody in the first group.

To the people

A bill is making its way through the Legislature that, at first glance, has little consequence to any of you. At least until you look at the bigger picture.

The legislation is known as the Oasis Bill, which would make up to 300,000 acre feet of additional water from the Columbia River available to new or existing farms and businesses, allowing irrigation of an additional 100,000 acres of farmland in the northeast part of the state.

While the temptation may be to shrug off this legislation as irrelevant, the truth is that as the agriculture economy goes in northeast Oregon, so goes the number of jobs, business expansions and the stability of the region.

Do you work at a Main Street retail store? You'd better give this issue some attention. Do you work at a farm-supply business? This is about you.

Because when the agricultural economy thrives, so do employers who reap the benefits of increased sales and better profits, which allow for new investment. To the other extreme, when the ag economy stagnates or declines, your employers soon feel the pinch and start looking for cost savings and consider work force reductions.

There is no question the Oasis legislation holds promise for everyone in northeast Oregon who puts their faith in an economy anchored by agriculture.

To the lawmakers

The House of Representatives has passed this bill and sent it on to the Senate, where it's not expected to receive a warm welcome. In fact, the bill wasn't strongly embraced in the House where it passed with a 35-22 vote. And with no surprise, lawmakers on the west side of the state were the most vocal in their opposition.

As to the lawmakers in the Senate who may take the lead from opposition in the House, this is not a special interest water grab.

Initially it may benefit those who operate irrigated farms, but the tentacles of this economic surge eventually will embrace the entire region. And with all due respect to the House members from Oregon populous west side, the combined residents of Umatilla, Morrow and Gilliam counties number in excess of 85,000. That number hardly represents "only a few" who will benefit. All of them stand to gain from a growing and thriving economy.

To the governor

Assuming the bill makes it through the Senate with amendments, Gov. Ted Kulongoski has said he will

veto the bill. We in Eastern Oregon think that would be a big mistake. We know the governor doesn't like this bill because it doesn't fit with his vision for aquifer recharge. We know he worries about the equity of diverting more water from the Columbia River at the risk of offending neighbors in Washington and Idaho, as well as the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

But Gov. Kulongoski hasn't done much to move this region in the direction of aquifer recharge. And while the state of Washington moves ahead with long-range planning to divert more water from the Columbia, we in Eastern Oregon can ill afford to worry about offending the fine residents of the Evergreen State.

This bill holds promise of adding tens of millions of dollars annually to the economy of northeast Oregon, all from a quantity of water that amounts to a microscopic drop in the barrel that represents the Columbia River.

And if the governor pulls out his veto pen, the East Oregonian will expect an op-ed from the governor detailing the urgent steps he intends to pursue over the next three years to move his aquifer recharge agenda off the dime.

We won't be satisfied with well-rehearsed political double-speak. We'll expect an op-ed that tells all of us what he intends to do as the leader of our state government to aggressively pursue his alternatives to the Oasis Project.

Back to the people

As to those who do most of the working, playing and dying in this region, if you're satisfied with where this legislation is headed, by all means stay silent. But if you care about future prosperity, you will speak your mind by calling your Senate representation and the governor's office, pleading for passage of this crucial piece of legislation.