IRRIGATION STORAGE EFFICIENCY ACT

Irrigation districts who hold senior water rights on our rivers and streams are working hard to meet the growing demand for water. While addressing competing interests from growing communities, districts are prioritizing water management and conservation. In the Deschutes River Basin, irrigation efforts are guided by the work of the Upper Deschutes Basin Study, the work of a group of committed stakeholders dedicated to resolving longstanding water management issues using science and collaboration to find workable, sustainable solutions.[1]

The Irrigation Storage Efficiency Act was drafted in the spirit of the Basin Study. Designed to clarify the ability of irrigation districts to manage water to the benefit of the local environment and community, it proposes to increase the flexibility of stored water rights to enable districts meet competing demands.

In the Deschutes Basin, Tumalo Irrigation District (TID) wants to permanently transfer existing water storage rights into the Deschutes River to help protect the Oregon spotted frog. At the same time, TID is working to pipe its delivery system so that more water can be left in rivers and streams as opposed to being lost to leakage. Mechanically, this requires reregulation facilities to be built within the district. These projects require TID to transfer storage water to new locations. As projects are completed and more water is left in stream, mitigation credits are granted to TID that are can be transferred to cities or other water users to support their growing water needs.

Historically, the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) has interpreted Oregon law to allow the transfer of stored water. However, in the past two years, the Department has reversed course and is no longer approving such transfer requests. The Department has also failed to process storage transfer requests – resulting in a de facto denial, but without the opportunity for an appeal by the applicant. TID and other districts need to be able to transfer water be a good steward of Oregon's precious water resources.

This legislation reinstitutes and confirms that the OWRD has the authority to change the type of use and place of use of stored water and requires OWRD to evaluate applications for such transfers in a timely manner.

The benefits of the Irrigation Storage Efficiency Act are numerous and include:

- **Irrigation District Modernization**: Many irrigation districts, including TID, have an aging water distribution system that lose more than 50% of diverted water to seepage. As districts continue to pipe these systems, reregulation facilities (in-district storage ponds) are mechanically necessary to balance the system and achieve the full aim of water

[1] Upper Deschutes Basin Study, https://www.usbr.gov/pn/studies/deschutes/

conservation. Districts need the ability to reduce pressure in pipes, or to pump additional water to stabilize pressure and push water to the end of the line. This legislation would allow districts to move stored water to reregulation ponds, providing increased flexibility and better water management toward the aim of conservation.

- **Fire Protection**: Storage reservoirs provide a critical fire protection resource. Already, a series of reservoirs in TID's district have been used as a source of fire-fighting water for the Two Bulls Fire (2014) and the Shevlin Park fire (2015). Beyond providing a source for helicopters and tankers to fill, ponds provide active firebreaks in Oregon's most fire-prone areas.

- **Habitat Enhancement:** Storage water transfers support fish, aquatic species, local deer and elk populations, birds and other wildlife. Allowing transfers of stored water in-stream will ensure that water is available for threatened species, including the Oregon Spotted Frog. Allowing reregulation facilities to store water when flows are high will allow districts to leave water instream when summer flows are low.

- **Elevating Local Communities**: As central Oregon cities continue to grow, the demands on live flows from rivers and streams and on groundwater systems for municipal uses is compounded. Mitigation credits generated through irrigation district modernization projects can be used to balance increased municipal uses.

- **Consistent and Efficient Delivery to Farmers**: Water is the lifeblood for farmers. In Central Oregon, the growing season is short. Increased district efficiency allows farms to have a more consistent flow of water throughout the irrigation season. The ability to move stored water can ensure that water is stored for longer in modern reregulation ponds (less seepage) and in a location that allows the districts to even-out deliveries, providing the peace of mind that water will be available when needed. Improving the delivery of pressurized water reduces the cost to farmers of pumping and pressurizing their own systems, with significant efficiency gains and reduced electricity costs.

Unreliable water availability threatens the future needs of our natural systems. The Irrigation Storage Efficiency Act will support irrigation districts as they work to be stewards of public resources by accommodating diverse interests through increased flexibility and management of their systems.

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