

September, 2019

WILL AGRICULTURE SURVIVE IN JEFFERSON COUNTY?

North Unit Irrigation District and its 59,000 acres is the heartland of Central Oregon agriculture has the best climate and elevation 2400' for the many seed crops. Warm days and cool nights enable strong bee pollination for high germination seeds. NUID is the second largest irrigation district in Oregon.

What is this Jefferson County zone's future? Madras has always had specialty crops: ladino clover, bluegrasses, vegetable seeds of garlic, sugar beet, onion seed, and carrot seed. Peppermint was a mainstay for many years. Will hemp for CBD survive as a new crop? These crops usually have a potential for higher profit margins. They benefit from NUIDs isolation which mitigates disease, weeds, and pests. Crops like wheat, corn, soybean are raised in many regions of America and have large markets with slimmer profit margins.

Several keys are necessary for long term survival of farming in Jefferson County.

- **Ag business infrastructure.** It is mandatory that the equipment dealers and seed and fertilizer dealers remain viable. In the early '50s Jasa Ag and Jefferson County Co-op sold over 60 combines in one year at a cost near \$1500 each. Today, machines cost over \$450,000 for a combine and \$165,000 for a windrower. The new hemp balers cost \$500,000. Seed processors must go outside Jefferson County to maintain a large farm client base, including trips to Post, Paulina, and even Christmas Valley. The zone is blessed to have global crop marketing for carrot and grass seed. Central Oregon Seeds has 45 employees and a \$12 million facility with new carrot cold storage. Their global seed sales for 2018 were 35-40 million dollars. Pratum has 35 employees, a \$10 million plant and just completed a new fertilizer plant and a grass seed storage addition.
- **Sufficient Water.** The Deschutes Basin has enough water for NUID but sharing and conservation projects must be reallocated to accommodate drought, the spotted frog, and instream flow augmentation for fish. UP stream senior irrigation districts must become more efficient and share

their excess. Environmental concerns must refrain from forcing expense litigation on small Madras farms.

- Land Use Protection. The future population surge in Central Oregon must resist the notion that farmland serves as a rural open space housing zone. All irrigated farmland must stay in production to maintain the NUID critical mass. Politicians must not allow accessory dwellings in exclusive farm use zones or destination resorts. Farmers today are removing houses to allow pivot irrigation to minimize labor needs and conserve water. Economies of scale necessitate larger farms. In 2019, there are 13 family farms farming over 1000 acres to help spread operating and equipment costs. Early farmers could make a living on 80 acres each with a home. Madras has been blessed with high profit margin crops.

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What it means to be a junior water right holder!

This is my 50th year farming in Madras. I'm the son of an Idaho farmer who came to the North Unit Irrigation District (NUID) in 1948. Father took the first delivery of water on the Agency Plains North of Madras in June of 1948 after the Willow Creek siphon was repaired. He was always concerned if NUID would have enough water to raise the crops in all years.

NUID is the second largest irrigation district in Oregon and is junior to the other seven Deschutes Basin irrigation districts. NUID'S 1916 water rights were the last issued and received the smallest per acre allotment. With the best elevation and climate Madras farms have raised the highest economic value crops in Central Oregon: Ladino clover, potatoes, grass seed, peppermint, garlic seed, alfalfa, fresh radish, and onion and carrot seed.

Now, because of the drought and spotted frog augmented flows, junior North Unit District Irrigation is suffering the most. Our Wickiup reservoir failed to fill and our board has set this year's allotment at 18 inches on Deschutes acres and 9 inches on Crooked River rights. While other districts within the basin with 72-inch allotments will receive normal deliveries (equivalent to 72" of rain delivered in the six month irrigation season). It takes at a minimum of over 30 inches to grow most crops.

My farm, like many of my neighbors, must idle crop ground. I have 578.1 acres with water rights and will fallow 182.3 acres or 31.5% of my cropland. However, I paid for the full allotment of \$43,112.91. Competing in a world market makes this unsustainable.

For the greatest agricultural economy in Central Oregon to continue to thrive several changes must take place.

1. Oregon water law must be amended to allow intra district transfers of abundant water from upstream districts to NUID. One acre of Deschutes County districts' water will water three acres in Jefferson County.
2. Beneficial use is when water is used for agriculture. When watered cropland becomes urbanized those water rights should go to the junior water right

holders as the law was intended, and not held solely for power generation or revenue producing via instream leasing.

3. Water diversion from storage in NUID's Wickiup reservoir to meet "The Habitat Conservation Plan" must be realistic. Considering factors as the drought that NUID has been facing, as well as timelines for completing conservation practices. Continued stored water takings will be catastrophic for NUID's farmers and its community.
4. The goal of The Coalition for the Deschutes, law makers, and Oregon Water Resources on conserving water in the Deschutes Basin is a priority. It can only happen when those districts with the greatest potential to conserve water do so, and money that is needed to complete those projects is available. Today, funding is a challenge and takes time.

Water is precious and costly for Madras North Unit farmers, we have implemented: 24-hour water measurement and delivery, tail water recovery, gated pipe, ditch piping, low pressure pivots and drip irrigation. As the frog and upper Deschutes instream flow requirements increase, all districts must conserve and share the burden.

Should Jefferson County farmers be the only irrigators to suffer because of the frog? "Junior" does mean junior; but what business can take a 25-30% reduction in their income stream and survive? Our seed warehouses, fertilizer and equipment dealers, our employees, plus Madras and Culver retailers also have a stake in the game. Saving the basin for frogs, fish and environmental concerns can't be just about NUID. It is about everyone in the basin sharing for the greater good and changing their past ways. Water is recognized as the life blood that benefits agriculture, which in turn provides for wildfire buffers, wildlife habitat and helps the environment. The choice is farms versus houses and urban sprawl.

Junior Water Right holder, but hopeful,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amy R. King". The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a white background.

Madras Farmer, OSU Ag Econ grad 1969, current Jeff Co. Farm Bureau V-Pres, LCDC commission '96-'04