



Connecting Central Oregon's Water, Land & Environment

**DESCHUTES BASIN IRRIGATION DISTRICTS REMAIN FIRMLY COMMITTED
TO BASIN-WIDE HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN**

August 12, 2021

Despite extreme and persistent drought conditions this summer, all eight irrigation districts belonging to the Deschutes Basin Board of Control (DBBC) remain firmly committed to implementing the conservation measures outlined in the Deschutes Basin Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP). Adherence to the plan means that the DBBC districts are authorized to continue to access what limited water supplies are available during times of drought, and district patrons can rely on these supplies with confidence based on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's approval of the HCP last December.

The HCP was the product of 12 years of scientific study, hard work and collaboration with our regional partners and community members. The plan sets the course for conservation efforts for the next 30 years, and provides the districts with both a pathway and time for modernizing their delivery systems through canal piping and other projects. These modernization efforts will not only benefit district patrons—in some cases, enabling water to be conserved in one district and then made available for use in another district, but they will simultaneously conserve significant quantities of water that can be used to support fish and wildlife listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In the meantime, so long as the districts continue to follow the plan, the districts will remain in compliance with the ESA, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will not require any additional district water supplies be committed to listed species. Without the HCP, the districts and their patrons would be at risk of further water shut-offs and endless court battles, whether the lawsuits are brought by the Federal government or third-party citizen groups.

As everyone is well aware, this year's drought has been extraordinarily difficult for farmers in the Deschutes Basin. Live flows (i.e., natural flows that are not stored in a reservoir in the winter and released during the irrigation season) fell well below pre-season predictions, much to the surprise of basin hydrologists with decades of experience. As a result, the irrigation season will be much shorter than originally planned for many basin water users, even in light of proactive measures to extend the irrigation season. Districts that rely primarily or exclusively on live flow are ending up significantly short, while districts that also use stored water have had to rely on those supplies earlier and more extensively than normal. In the end, this year's drought has meant less water for district patrons as well as fish and wildlife.

But unlike some other basins in the West, the HCP provided some water supply protections. District patrons were able to access much of their live flow and stored water supplies that were available even with the drought, while simultaneously supporting fish and wildlife habitat and remaining in compliance with the ESA. This was not an accidental or unanticipated outcome of the HCP. Rather, it was something the districts, their regional partners, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spent the past 12 years planning for. The magnitude of this year's drought took us all by

PO Box 919 - Madras, OR 97741

Deschutes Basin Board of Control Member Districts

*Arnold Irrigation District • Central Oregon Irrigation District • Lone Pine Irrigation District • North Unit Irrigation District
Ochoco Irrigation District • Swalley Irrigation District • Three Sisters Irrigation District • Tumalo Irrigation District*

DBBC President – Craig Horrell, 541-548-6047; chorrell@coid.org



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surprise, but the possibility of a drought is something we recognized and painstakingly accounted for in the design of the HCP. The districts now coordinate water management in real-time with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and this coordination has made it possible to utilize the limited amount of water we have this year to the mutual benefit of farmers, fish and wildlife. Without this coordinated management, conditions for all concerned would be much worse.

The DBBC is well aware that some believe the HCP does not do enough, or does not do things quickly enough, for fish and wildlife, while some others believe that the HCP goes too far and threatens the economic viability of central Oregon farms and ranches. We are also well aware that a number of national groups on both sides are taking an interest in our basin, making intentionally inaccurate and inflammatory statements in an effort to fuel fears and generate discontent in furtherance of their own causes. We do not intend to allow those sentiments to influence or undermine our resolve. As we've noted, the HCP is the result of over 12 years of studies and negotiations between all interested parties in the basin. Despite what detractors and late-comers may attempt to suggest, the districts remain firmly convinced that the HCP strikes the right balance between the diverse interests in the basin and that implementation should continue.

After years of collaborative efforts in multiple forums, a lawsuit in federal court, and significant financial investments by state and federal governments along with private sources, we strongly believe that our communities should continue to work together from within rather than take direction from the outside. It was this collective effort that resulted in the HCP, and opened the door to many millions of dollars of investments in the modernization of basin infrastructure. And it's this same collective effort that is needed to secure drought relief, facilitate voluntary water right transfers between farmers, and generate support and funding for larger scale water management projects that benefit both farmers and ranchers, and fish and wildlife. As only one example, North Unit is currently exploring the potential of releasing water from Wickiup Reservoir in the winter (as provided for in the HCP), but then utilizing this same water during the irrigation season by pumping it from Lake Billy Chinook. But these efforts will not succeed with polarizing rhetoric or constant litigation. We wouldn't have gotten this far had we opted for that path when we began work on the HCP some 12 years ago.

The DBBC acknowledges the difficulties this year is presenting for everyone in the Deschutes Basin. We are committed to tackling problems, exploring solutions, and most importantly, maintaining an open, constructive and collaborative dialogue with our regional partners about water management in our basin, for both irrigation and fish and wildlife habitat purposes.

Craig Horrell,
DBBC President and Central Oregon Irrigation District Managing Director

Mike Britton
North Unit Irrigation District Manager

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