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A rite of spring: irrigation water flows to farm lands

BY LAUREN McLAUGHLIN
of the Journal

EPHRATA — It's an annual rite of spring: On Wednesday, gates opened at Dry Falls Dam at Coulee City and 863,446,320 gallons of water pumped from the Columbia River began flowing southward from Banks Lake Reservoir to irrigate 671,000 acres of farmland in central Washington.

Basin project delivery readied

Priming the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Columbia Basin Project has been a yearly ritual for over 50 years.

But it's not an overnight process. It takes 10 to 14 days for water to move from a reservoir through the 343 miles of principal canals and 2,026 miles of lateral canals that make up the irrigation system.

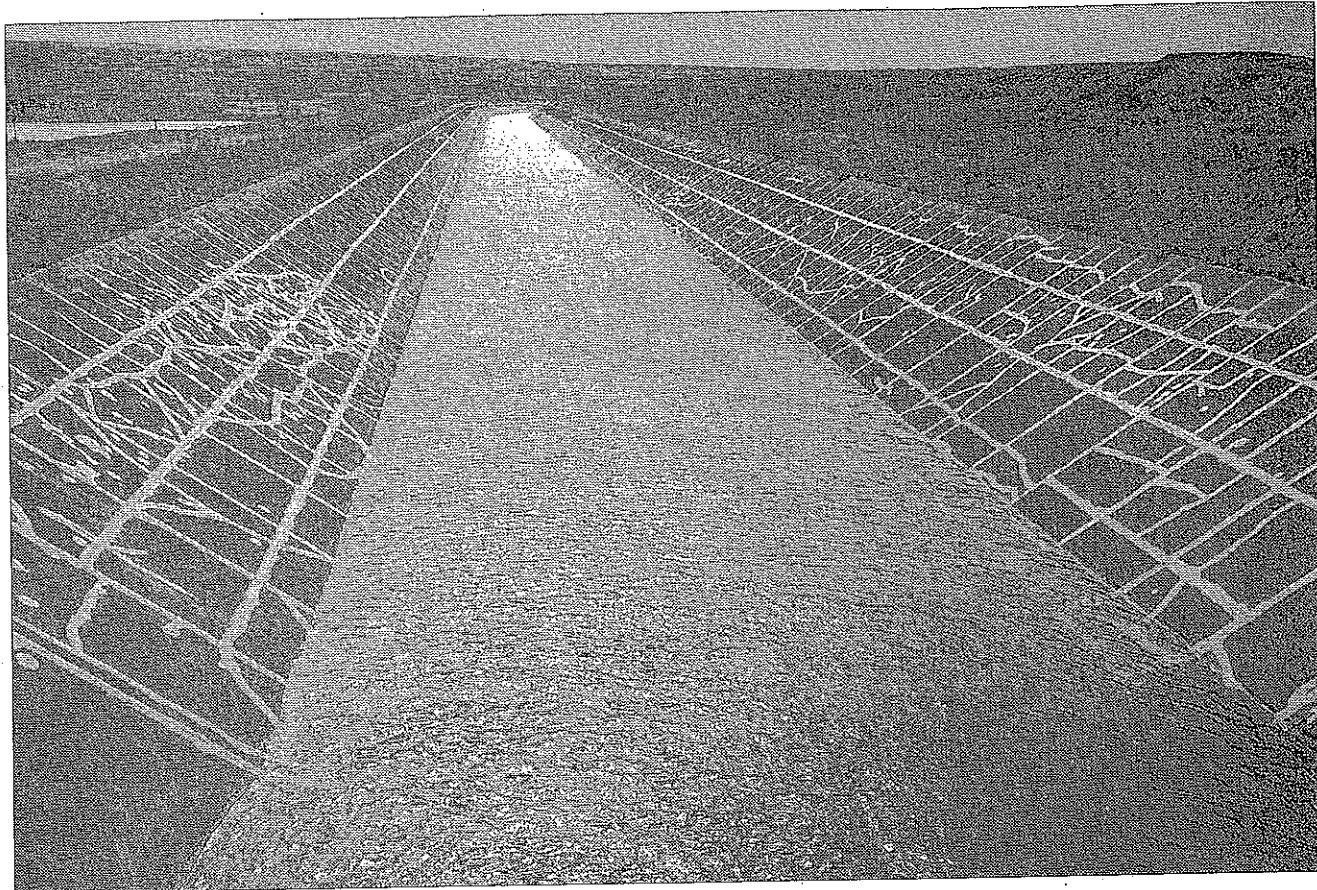
But thanks to this labyrinth of ditches, the Basin's desert soil now blooms each year into fertile ground which has been plowed, planted and

harvested for over 50 years, generating over \$1 billion in revenue from crops alone. Along with farm land, irrigation has allowed many of the region's small cities and towns to flourish and bring jobs to an area that would otherwise not be utilized. This delivery of water has influenced every community from Grand Coulee to Mattawa.

The coordinated process starts at the north end of the project, where water stored behind Grand Coulee Dam is pumped up 300 feet or more from the Columbia River through massive tubes to fill and maintain 27-mile-long Banks Lake Reservoir.

From the gated earthen dam at the south end of Banks Lake, the water travels to the Bacon Siphon and Tunnel, plunges over Summer Falls into Billy Clapp Lake, then passes through another earthen dam before the precious liquid bifurcates, or splits, in separate directions: into the canal systems through the East Low Canal and West Canal.

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Near Coulee City, sunlight shines on the rippled surface of irrigation water in a canal that feeds an elaborate distribution system to thousands of acres of farmlands included in the Columbia Basin Project.

Photo by Lauren McLaughlin

Public records roadblocks?

OLYMPIA, Wash. (AP) — Almost 40 years after Washington voters passed the Public Records Act, state transparency groups fear lawmakers are chipping away at the provisions of the law.

Groups fear lawmakers chipping at provisions

Several bills introduced in the 2011 session aimed to clarify or narrow the scope of the act, a move Toby Nixon

lic records requests on a regular basis. Their reaction, he said, is to propose "onerous" charges for the labor and search time.

Bills that would have allowed agencies to charge for records searches and required agencies to keep track of how much records searches cost died in committee.

The law requires agencies to respond to records requests within five business days, either granting them, denying them, or giving an estimated time frame on when records will be

of limitations after a case last year in which a requester filed a lawsuit two years after requesting records.

The lawsuit was possible because of the court's literal interpretation of existing law, which says the one-year limit starts to run after the notifications are made or the last installment of records is produced.

In the 2010 case, the agency had provided all the records in one go, and the court said the last-installment rule didn't apply. When agencies provide records all at once, if current law is in-

Death of eluding driver investigated

BY RANDY BRACHT
of the Journal

MOSES LAKE — The Washington State Patrol is investigating circumstances surrounding the death of a Warden man who tried to elude police in a vehicle chase Tuesday night.

David Folden, 40, died shortly after he wrecked his 1992 Ford Ranger pickup near the intersection

deputies involved in the pursuit said Folden — who was not wearing a seatbelt — became unconscious shortly after the collision. While performing CPR, officers located a bag of suspected drugs inside Folden's mouth.

Responding aid crews continued resuscitation efforts but were unable to revive him, and Folden died at the scene, the report stated.

The incident began around 7:30

Irrigation

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The East Low Canal meanders toward Moses Lake, wraps around Warden, and ends a few miles above Connell. The West Canal goes westward around Soap Lake, then bends southward past Ephrata toward Quincy, then along the Frenchmen Hills.

Water not used by farmers in those areas will eventually pool into another large storage location, Potholes Reservoir, where it's then distributed to irrigated lands in south Grant County and neighboring Adams and Franklin counties.

While the water is targeted to hundreds of farms which grow an amazing variety of crops, it has also created ponds, small lakes, and wetlands that have become havens for wildlife, and a boon to hunters, fishermen, and other outdoor enthusiasts.

The irrigation project is based on a gravity system, with the Basin geography creating a series of bowls and water constantly flowing downhill through the canals.

"About 30 to 40 percent of the water released into the canals is reclaimed in the Potholes reservoir," said Bureau of Reclamation irrigation operations and

technical service manager John O'Callaghan of Ephrata.

The distribution system is split into three irrigation districts: the East, South, and Quincy Columbia Basin Irrigation Districts.

Each district has its own part to play in managing and preparing for the irrigation season.

"There's 100-plus people in each district involved in the irrigation project," O'Callaghan said.

By early April, farmers will be submitting requests to their respective district's "ditch riders" — employees driving the dirt and gravel roads along canals and laterals — and watermasters who monitor and adjust the flows in coordination with the Bureau of Reclamation.

"It's not just a free-for-all. We make sure there is enough water flowing in the canals to serve everyone who requests it," O'Callaghan said.

The ditch rider will adjust weir gates or devices used to monitor flow to ensure the correct amount of water reaches the farmers' lands.

Farmers are able to change their requests daily, to adjust for changes in weather or crops.

Before this annual water-de-

livery ballet can happen, though, the canals must be maintained.

"We've been clearing debris out of the canals, burning tumbleweeds, and the grasses that grow on the sides of the earthen canals," said Quincy-Columbia Basin Irrigation District manager Darvin Fales.

In addition to the canals' spring cleanings, Fales said his crews use the off-season — the months after each irrigation season concludes in late October — to do repair work, such as replacing broken concrete, fixing impellers, and other infrastructure.

He said there's more than a billion good reasons to make sure everything is in good working order and flowing smoothly.

According to Fales, an economic impact study conducted in 2010 found the crops sustained by the irrigation water bring in \$1.44 billion a year in revenue, and provide 39,000 jobs with an annual income of \$2.4 billion.

"Putting water in the fields and growing crops feeds the world," said Fales.

There is no denying the irrigation project has made a huge impact on the economic, social, and recreational development of the Columbia Basin while avoiding the vagaries of Mother Nature in the Basin's harsh desert environment.

O'Callaghan summed it up best: "Nobody lived here before the irrigation project. No one would live here without it."



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Death

■ From page 1

Broadway Avenue in Moses Lake.

The trooper reported smelling a strong odor of marijuana coming Folden's pickup. When advised he was under arrest, Folden fled, leading the trooper and deputies on a vehicle chase on rural roads south of Moses Lake.

While attempting to elude officers, Folden was throwing marijuana and other items out his truck window, the WSP report stated.

The Ford, which was totaled in the collision, was impounded and the incident remains under investigation by the State Patrol's major accident investigation team.

Anyone who witnessed or

has knowledge of the circumstances is asked to contact WSP detectives Jerry Cooper or Bob Schroeder (call 360/805-1192 or 805-1194).

State Lottery

Wednesday Daily Game: 2-0-2.

Wednesday Match 4: 13-14-15-19.

Wednesday Hit 5: 5-10-19-26-28. No winner. Next jackpot: \$330,000.

Wednesday Lotto: 13-18-26-30-37-42. No winner. Next jackpot: \$8.7 million.

Wednesday Washington Keno: 7-10-17-18-21-27-37-40-41-43-45-47-54-56-61-65-71-74-76-79.

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