

U.S. quietly reconsiders water issue

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It came like a flood, unexpected and ominous. Now the controversy over "water spreading" has quietly receded — again.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's chief said Monday that he is "reconsidering" plans to adopt a policy for the West to eliminate unauthorized use of water on federal irrigation projects.

Instead, the bureau is considering giving the issue back to the agency's regional offices to handle — a suggestion irrigators made when the problem surfaced a year ago.

"We thought we could put together a West-wide policy to deal with this situation," Reclamation Commissioner Dan Beard told the Herald from his Washington, D.C., office Monday. "It's become apparent to us that one size doesn't fit all in this case, as we had initially thought."

The latest move represents one in a series of decisions that changed the bureau's course toward resolving the issue, but a welcome one for farmers.

"The bureau is getting more and more reasonable on how to go at this," said Dick Erickson, manager of the East Columbia Basin Irrigation District in Othello.

"But I would like them to finally make up their minds. The bureau brought this big question up a year ago, and they still haven't a solid plan in writing," Erickson added.

Beard's new plan came to light in a Washington, D.C., meeting last week with Erickson, Pasco farmer Bryan Alford and Shannon McDaniel, manager of the South Columbia Basin Irrigation District in Pasco. Two representatives of the Quincy Irrigation District in Quincy also attended the meeting.

The water-spreading controversy began in earnest last summer, when the bureau claimed some irrigators were using water from federal projects illegally.

In the Columbia Basin Project, the problem stemmed

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from irrigating land designated as unirrigable when it was classified 40 years ago. Most of that land was too high to be irrigated with gravity-fed irrigation, the norm when the project was built. That changed with the advent of center pivot irrigation.

The bureau has since backed off, saying those areas will likely be reclassified.

However, in Oregon's Umatilla Project, the term has a more serious meaning. Officials say four districts have used federal project water to irrigate an additional 17,000 acres outside irrigation district boundaries. Irrigators contend the bureau failed to recognize boundary changes it approved a decade ago.

Beard's agency initially planned to adopt formal rules through the Federal Register. Those rules would have spelled out specifically how to deal with water spreading in all of the agency's irrigation projects in the West.

The draft rules were supposed to have been in place this spring, with public hearings this summer and adoption this fall.

Beard said that plan was scrapped

in favor of relegating authority back to the regional offices. General procedures for how each division will handle water spreading within its jurisdiction are being developed, he said.

"The people in our area offices are perfectly capable of dealing with the issue," Beard explained. "They know what the contracts contain, who

holds the water rights and what is permitted under law."

It likely will be months before the regional offices begin resolving the issue on a district-by-district basis, said John Keys, the bureau's regional director in Boise.

"I'd say it will be this summer or

fall before there are any real procedures developed. It could be a winter before any real action taken under any new procedure," Keys said.