

Water Future Under Study

Horse Heaven Irrigation Project

By Audra Hoefer

Spurred into action by a “sunset clause” in the Washington Administrative Code, Horse Heaven Hills farmers and others are developing a plan for an irrigation system in the area.

According to WAC 173531A, drafted by Max Benitz Sr. and Sid Flannigan in the late 1970s, water from the John Day/McNary Pools Reach is reserved to provide water for 330,000 acres of irrigation projected to be developed by 2020. There was once a threat of the water being sent to California, says Duane Unland, owner of Nakaty Enterprises, Yakima. His company, along with several consulting and engineering firms, has the task of completing the conceptual plans for the major irrigation/water storage project.

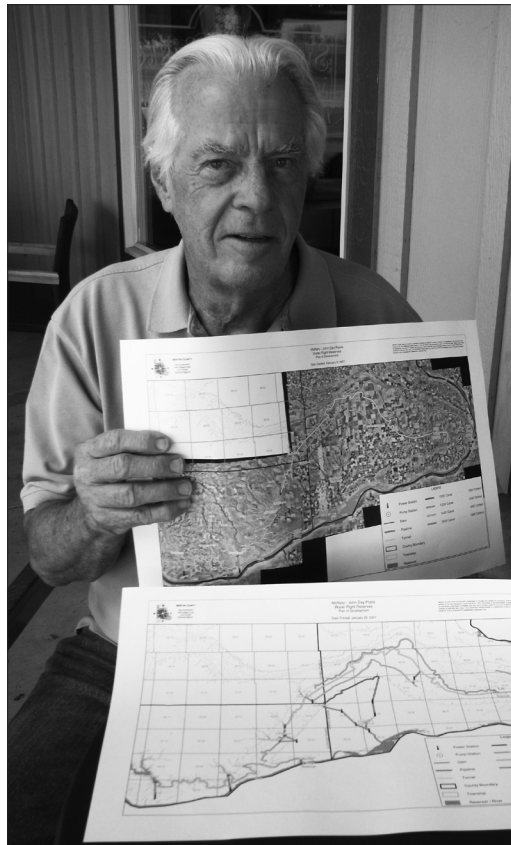
Phases 1 through 3 of the project began in 2001 in response to the Columbia River Initiative and new rules proposed by the state Department of Ecology, says Duane. The rules would have affected water permits.

When the economy was in a downturn, everything slowed down.

“Now it’s really picked up again,” Duane says. “There’s interest in better use of water and energy sustainability.”

The sunset clause provides that by 2020 a plan must have been submitted to the Department of Ecology.

“We’re trying to create an industry that is a water/power utility,” says Duane. “Phase 4 should help define that utility. Part of that relationship involves the electric utilities. Benton REA has been



instrumental in supporting a sustainable concept for power.”

The concept includes two sources of power: hydro and wind, both of which would move water into the systems and then offer a resale back through.

The economic value from developing irrigated agriculture is “very interesting,” says Duane.

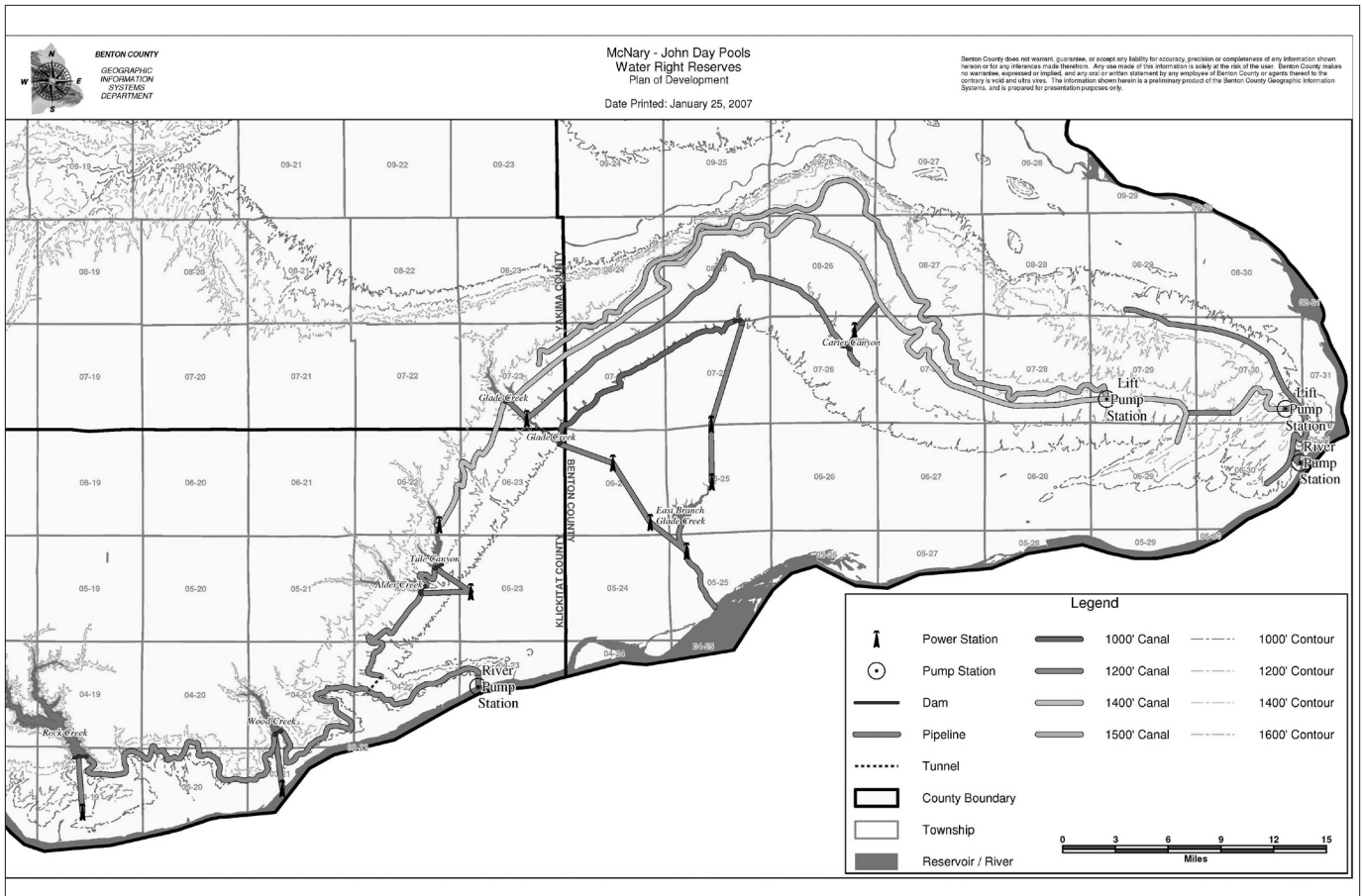
“It would affect the tree industry, more (product) packing, additional employment and more,” he says. “The ground appreciates from \$400 an acre to \$4,000 an acre when you add irrigation. The benefit to Benton County and the state of Washington is added employment, added economic value and a strong tax base.”

In fact, the Horse Heaven Hills area is the only place left in the state that has that kind of value, says Duane. Onions, wheat, wine grapes, corn, potatoes and apples are among the crops grown there.

“Water, highway and air transportation systems are excellent here and this project could add a potential labor base to the southern part of the state,” says Duane. “The project is well-supported.

“It’s a timing issue. There was some reluctance at first due to farm competition. Products couldn’t sell due to low prices, but now produce prices are back to an economic benefit. The concern of overproduction has gone away.

“During a farm market surplus time, some asked ‘why develop more farm ground to create more products when we can’t sell what we have?’ We’re no longer in that state. Biofuels and synthetic fuels from food products have increased demand. Products



aren't only used for food consumption now, though there's still a high demand for food in China and India."

Four dryland farmers have helped spearhead the project and recently submitted a letter to Benton County Commissioners outlining the results of a survey. Mike Schmitt, Jim Moon, Mike Nichols and Scott Andrews compose the Horse Heaven Hills Irrigation Project Coalition.

"We believe that this project significantly supports the need for future economic growth in our region," the coalition states. "Increasing growth in Benton County will benefit the entire region by substantially increasing the tax base, and to the residents through value added economic benefit."

Benton REA administered a survey sent to dryland wheat growers and major agricultural irrigators a few months ago. Its purposes were:

- To determine the level of interest in developing long-term delivery of irrigation water through a large canal and pump storage conveyance system in the Horse Heaven Hills area (HHH)
- To determine the acreage of those interested in receiving water to their land
- To find out present land values and how the

system might benefit those willing to participate or contribute to the project

- To identify whether a majority would encourage Benton County Commissioners to move forward with the study.

Surveys were sent to 56 farmers who owned more than 2,000 acres of land, mostly more than 1,000 feet above sea level and located in Benton County or split ownerships in Benton-Klickitat counties.

Of those surveyed, 30 responded. Twenty-three of those were in favor of receiving irrigation water, if economically realistic. Those farmers collectively own 131,055 acres or 51 percent of the survey area. Eighty percent of those surveyed were in favor of moving forward with Phase 4 of the study.

The HHH Coalition maintains that the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) and wind power organizations have also expressed interest in the project.

"Combining hydropower, wind power, and irrigation into a water/power utility operation is a natural fit in today's energy environment," states the coalition farmers.

BPA indicated that pump storage is essential to wind-hydropower cooperation, says Duane.