

Governor hears impact first-hand from family

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Gov. Ted Kulongoski, right, visits with, from right, Dick Carleton and his nephew, Greg, and son, Jim, Thursday on a tour of farmland south of Klamath Falls. The Carleton family has farmed in the Klamath Basin since 1909.

MERRILL — Jim Carleton is operating his family's farm despite a water shortage in the Klamath Basin this year.

But it isn't easy.

Carleton and his family met with Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski Thursday when he visited the more than 100-year-old farm outside Merrill.

The Carletons told the governor they learned from the 2001 water crisis that cut off irrigation to the region. Still, they said, few farmers have completely recovered, and this year's struggles are no less challenging.

"Well, we have a well, but we're operating at 70 percent and the bills go on to 100 percent," Jim Carleton said.

Carleton Farms has 2,500 acres of what is usually planted with potatoes, wheat and hay, as well as pastures with cattle. Fifty percent of the hay is exported and the potatoes usually end up as potato chips or help fulfill a contract with Campbell Soup Co.

But things are a far cry from the way they were before the 2001 water crisis.

Jim Carleton said the family had to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy after that year because of the debt it brought. They dug a well to prepare for future shortages and insured all their crops.

"Our contract is about a third of what it was before '01," said Greg Carleton, Jim's cousin, of the family's Campbell contract.

Kulongoski also visited the Malin Potato Cooperative in Merrill, where workers were packing potatoes from last year's harvest.

General manager Dave Cacka said he wouldn't know the impact of the irrigation season until October. But, he said, he appreciated the governor's visit.

“It ties us to Salem and gives them an idea of what’s happening,” he said. “It’s a positive, positive thing.”

Kulongoski said he took a lot away from his tour of the Basin Thursday, notably the resiliency of the region’s agricultural community. At the same time, they need water, he said, especially if there is going to be a next generation to farm the land.

“The impact is more than economical, it affects the fabric of the community,” the governor said.

Side Bar

Farmers thank governor for support of KBRA

The Carleton family thanked Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski Thursday for his support of the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement, saying it provides some certainty for their farm.

The family and its 100-year-old farm outside Merrill survived the 2001 water crisis. Irrigator Jim Carleton said the agreement would provide certainty to the agricultural community, despite what opponents say.

“The naysayers are getting all the water they want this year or they don’t have a dog in the fight,” he said.

The KBRA seeks to resolve water conflicts in the Klamath River watershed and includes several conditions, including removal of four hydroelectric dams on the Klamath River, power and environmental protections for irrigators and land for local native tribes.

Stakeholders signed the agreement in late February and are awaiting Congressional action and funding to implement it.

Kulongoski said the federal government, from the White House to Oregon’s congressional delegation, is in support of the agreement. But, he added, other national concerns need to be addressed before Congress can seriously consider the KBRA.

“The problem is there is a serious concern in D.C. about the deficit,” the governor said.

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