

Neb. County Reconsiders Support Of Pipeline

CENTRAL CITY, Neb. (AP) — The Merrick County Board is reconsidering its support of a proposed pipeline that would carry Canadian oil through Nebraska on its way to refineries near the Gulf of Mexico. The board voted last month to write a letter supporting TransCanada's proposed Keystone XL pipeline, which is under federal review. Chairman Roger Wiegert told the Grand Island Independent that the board will vote again on May 24. Environmental groups have raised concerns that the pipeline could foul water supplies and increase pollution. Wiegert says he's heard from people on both sides of the issue and he's not sure how he'll vote. One board member who had voted for the letter, D.L. Hahn, says he should have abstained because he has a contract for TransCanada to store pipe on his land.

NPPD Eyes 6.5 % Hike For Wholesale Rate

COLUMBUS, Neb. (AP) — The Nebraska Public Power District is eyeing a 6.5 percent rate hike for its wholesale customers in 2012. Controller Donna Starzec told the Telegram that the utility had expected its finances to break even this year but, as of April, it was short \$13 million. She cited low in-state sales and prices and a refueling outage at the Cooper Nuclear Station that cost \$36 million. The NPPD board won't vote on a rate increase until November. It would take effect Jan. 1. For 2011, the Columbus-based utility raised rates 11.4 percent for residential customers and 9.7 percent for wholesale customers. NPPD sells electricity wholesale to 52 towns and 25 rural districts and cooperatives. It serves about 80 communities at the retail level.

Omaha Man Uses Billboards In Solar Fight

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — An Omaha homeowner has put up billboards, launched a website and taken to social media in his fight against his neighborhood association, which is suing him over the solar panels on his roof. Timothy Adams says he didn't know he needed permission from the South Shore Heights Homeowners Association before putting up the panels last fall. Adams says the association has been lax in enforcing its rules on residential improvements, so it was surprising that they ordered him to take the panels down. He refused to do so, and the association has filed a lawsuit. The dispute was first reported by the Omaha World-Herald.

UNMC To Offer New Option For Degree

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The University of Nebraska Medical Center is partnering with the Nebraska State College System and the University of Nebraska at Kearney to offer a new option for a degree in public health. The program targets students in their sophomore year at UNK or one of the three state colleges. Three students from each of the four schools will be selected for the program, which matches them with a UNMC mentor and provides a distance-learning course in public health. Students can opt to pursue a master's degree through UNMC's College of Public Health. More information can be obtained through admission offices at the participating schools.

Governor Says He Is Confident In Pipeline

RAPID CITY (AP) — Gov. Dennis Daugaard says he's confident in safety standards for a pipeline project that has come under public scrutiny after a spill near the border of North and South Dakota. TransCanada Corp.'s Keystone pipeline brings oil from Canada through the eastern Dakotas to other states. Daugaard tells KEVN-TV the South Dakota Public Utilities Commission has been holding extensive hearings on the expansion project. He says there will be safeguards in place to protect the environment.

Cuts Foster Fears Of Sapping Innovation

BY STEVE YOUNG
Associated Press

HIGHMORE — In the whirlwind of moves following the Legislature's decision this March to reduce state spending 10 percent across the board in South Dakota, an agricultural research station near Highmore landed in the rubble heap of those cuts. Little known to most South Dakotans, the Highmore facility, known as the Central Crops and Soils Research Station, can be seen as a sort of symbol as state and higher education officials try to come to grips with just how much damage the budget cuts have caused — and will cause in the future.

The pain of budget cuts are being felt on all public university campuses. Indeed, in every elementary school, nursing home, courthouse and corner of South Dakota that is losing state money, the greatest concerns in higher education seem to fall on the potential damage for ag research and the state's No. 1 industry. Long term, the cuts threaten innovation to help farmers, SDSU officials say, and already are driving away top researchers.

State Sen. Larry Tidemann, R-Brookings, said he didn't anticipate the depth of cuts to ag research and cooperative Extension when considering the budget this year. Lawmakers had asked SDSU officials for their plan if a 10 percent reduction was imposed. "They basically said, 'We don't know. We'll have to develop a plan,'" said Tidemann, vice chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. "Was I surprised by the extent of the cuts they ended up making in ag research? Yes."

Besides closing the Highmore station, SDSU research also took these hits: — 41 job layoffs within Agriculture Experiment Station and the Cooperative Extension service, as

well as the elimination of seven vacancies that won't be filled. —The closing of a soil testing lab and an agriculture-analysis lab on the SDSU campus. —A 17 percent reduction in pay for 99 agriculture researchers. —The closing of a second experiment station, in Miller.

Jack Warner, executive director of the Board of Regents, said ag research is tied directly to the strength and vulnerability of South Dakota's economy. So decisions to lay off researchers and reduce their salaries, Warner said, "are the ones I worry about the most."

There are other reasons to worry. SDSU Provost Laurie Nichols said her school already has lost several top-notch researchers who tired of the budget wrangling and took their work elsewhere.

To understand the effect of any significant loss or lull in ag research, South Dakotans need to understand what public university researchers have meant to their lives, officials say.

In the early 1970s, the few places growing soybeans in the state were in southeast South Dakota, in Lincoln, Union, Clay, Yankton and Turner counties, said Tidemann, a former director of Cooperative Extension.

Today, thanks to research that developed soybean varieties that have much shorter maturity cycles, Brown and Spink counties in the northeast part of the state are some of the top producers of the crop, he said.

SDSU researchers also were at the forefront of igniting the ethanol industry, said Gregg Carlson, a precision farming agronomist at SDSU. That helped spur the \$6- and \$7-a-bushel corn farmers are growing

today, he said. It has helped to drive up the value of crop land, especially in eastern South Dakota, to between \$5,000 and \$7,000 an acre.

Carlson estimates that higher yields generated by research, coupled with rising commodity prices, has meant as much as \$4 billion in profits to farmers growing corn, soybeans, wheat and alfalfa on South Dakota's 16 million acres of crop land.

He also estimates that the effect on rising land values, at an average of \$2,000 an acre for 50 million acres of farm and range land across the state, could be \$100 billion.

"With production agriculture being so successful today and with our university agronomy department taking such a tremendous hit, therein lies the irony," Carlson said.

"That's why there is so much frustration in our department among faculty members about what's going on," he said. "No one understands that agronomists across the United States are hard to find, in short supply. It makes me almost cry."

A microcosm of that frustration is playing out in Highmore, about 50 miles east of Pierre in the central part of South Dakota. The 120-acre station that was deemed to SDSU for research by Frank and Lillie Drew in 1899 has advanced crop production throughout the region in the years since.

Even early in the 1900s, agricultural research in South Dakota was important enough that an investigator at the state college in Brookings would set aside at least five days for the work needed at the Highmore experiment station.

And that was just to travel the

145 miles between the two communities by horse and wagon.

There were no mileage reimbursements in the early 1900s. Even then, money was tight — South Dakota State allowed a researcher one stop a day for a meal and paid for only two nights at a hotel along the way.

Still, the long journey was worth it. The research helped to push corn yields from 20 bushels an acre to 100 in central South Dakota, and wheat yields from 10 bushels to 30 and 40 bushels and beyond.

Researcher Mike Moechnig makes the trip in a little more than two hours. At least he will this year, in what could be the end of a 112-year relationship between SDSU and Highmore's Central Crops and Soils Research Station.

The area around Highmore typically is drier than other parts of the state, and so the station has been valuable, for example, in testing drought-resistant varieties of wheat. Moechnig, an Extension weeds specialist, does research on weed control, especially in tilled fields. Studies are being done there on alfalfa, trees, grasses and turf and soil conditions.

Gary Haiwick, who works the land four miles east and two south of Highmore, said the climactic conditions in the area are such "that we're one step from being a desert out here."

The experiment station offers him research to find varieties that grow best in those conditions.

SDSU officials say they are closing the station at the end of this growing season because it's not used as fully as it could be. They also say similar research is being done at a station called Dakota Lakes in Pierre.

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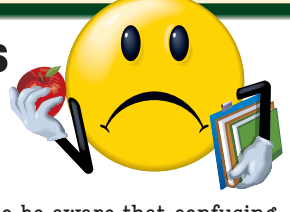
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