

Woodbridge Irrigation District director Ed Lucchesi to file claim against district

- Story

Editor's Note

Andy Christensen, general manager of Woodbridge Irrigation District, was not alluding to the North San Joaquin Water Conservation District when he spoke about delinquent charges in his own district. An earlier version of the story incorrectly implied Christensen was.

Posted: Friday, May 13, 2011 12:00 am

By Jordan Guinn

News-Sentinel Staff Writer

Ed Lucchesi is not only a director of the Woodbridge Irrigation District; he's also a customer who will be filing a claim for financial damages against the organization.

The wheat farmer lost 24 acres of his crop when work on a district canal took longer than expected and water could not be delivered to his land. At a district board meeting Thursday morning, general manager Andy Christensen made a public apology to Lucchesi.

"We were late getting water to the Wilkerson Lateral and he lost nearly 30 acres of wheat," Christensen said. "It's sad when a crop needs water and there is no way of getting there."

The claim won't be made until after wheat harvest is completed and total losses can be estimated, Lucchesi said. He and the rest of the board were not at odds with each other during the 45-minute meeting. Directors even made light-hearted remarks about the situation. When directors talked about participating in the Lodi Chamber of

Commerce's upcoming Ag Leadership Day, an educational forum offering community members a chance to understand how agriculture affects the area's economy, Christensen said Lucchesi already knows the lesson.

"It helps people understand the importance of water to our agriculture-based economy," Christensen said. "Ed sure does." The board — Lucchesi included — exchanged laughs at the comment before continuing with the meeting.

Lecchesi's crop was parched due to work on the district's Wilkerson Lateral Project taking longer than expected. The lateral is part of the Delta Water Supply Project, an under-construction enterprise the City of Stockton began in 2009.

When finished, the \$217 million project will deliver treated surface water for municipal uses. The water Stockton purchases from the district for the project will be delivered by the Wilkerson Lateral. The first phase of the Delta Water Supply Project is expected to be finished in 2012.

The canal is up and running now, Christensen said, and it took employees working nights and weekends to get it ready.

WID office update

The district has received building and highway encroachment permits for the new office it's building across the street from its current location.

"We've got our permit and we're ready to roll," Christensen said. Despite the recent updates, Board President Bill Stokes expressed displeasure with the county's public works department and board of supervisors for delaying the process. The board has discussed the building for several months and applied for a building permit in early March. The district received the permit in early April.

"All I know is that it is a big joke over there," Stokes said. "They're not doing anything."

When asked by Stokes if he had run into any recent troubles, Christensen only said that the county's fees are "very high."

The department isn't the lead agency for many of the permitting issues discussed at the meeting, said Alex Chetley, Senior Civil Engineer for San Joaquin County's Public Works Department.

"We have been working with them and we expedited the process for their recent road crossing permit on Armstrong Road," he said.

Another county department defended its efforts to hurry the process without cutting corners.

"We've been cut to no end," said Tom Ushing, deputy director of building inspections for San Joaquin County. "Where I used to have 16 inspectors, I now have four. I only have one plan-checker now, and we still turned their building permit around pretty quickly."

Construction will begin in the coming weeks as the district runs its sewer, gas and water lines underneath Lower Sacramento Road to the new location. Traffic will be slowed on the road as construction of the 5,000-square-foot office takes place, Christensen said, but two-way traffic will still flow.

Directors criticize North San Joaquin Water Conservation District WID directors took an opportunity to slam a neighboring water district when they unanimously approved a motion to put delinquent groundwater charges from its users on the county's tax roll. The district is owed \$3,892.97 from a variety of users, but Christensen declined to make the names public. However, he did say no directors of the district are behind on their payments.

"I won't list all the names, but I will say that no directors are on the list," he said.

A neighboring water district cannot say the same.

Directors Hugh Scanlon and Marden Wilbur of the North San Joaquin Water Conservation District, both owe delinquent payments to the agency. North San Joaquin is owed more than \$380,000 in delinquent payments from more than 1,500 people. The payments are from controversial groundwater charges from 2007 to 2009. While it has been ruled the district has the right to move forward to collect the outstanding debt, the board remains sharply divided on whether to pursue it. The directors with outstanding payments to the district would also have to recuse themselves from any vote on the issue to avoid a potential conflict of interest.

The irony was not lost on WID's president, who spoke briefly about the notoriously contentious board.

"I've been to their meetings, and it's appalling; nobody agrees on anything," said Stokes. "They need to get organized. They don't understand the importance of the commodity they are delivering."

Contact reporter Jordan Guinn at jordang@lodinews.com.

