Title Transfer of the Oakes Test Area Would Benefit Local Irrigators

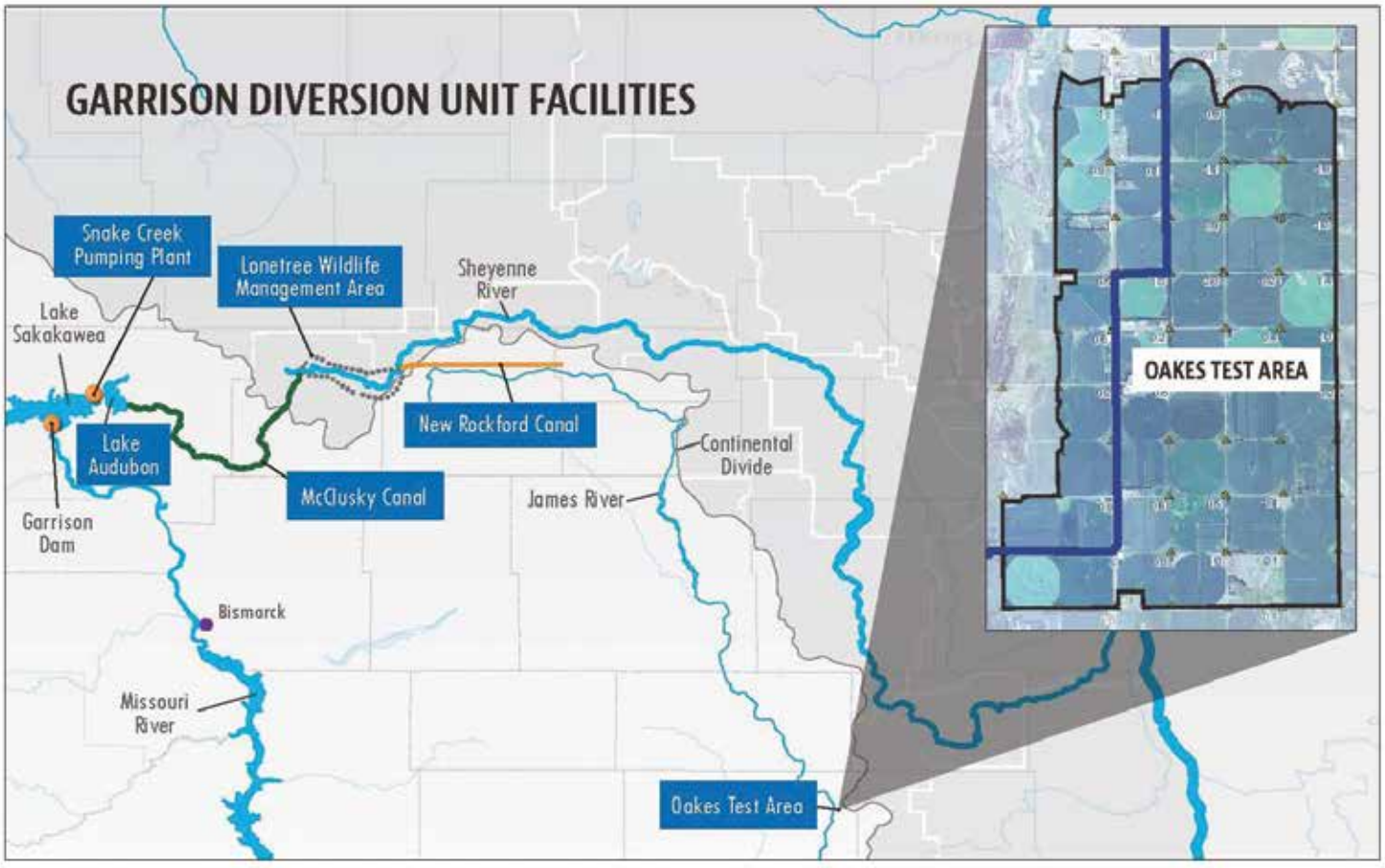
By Kimberly Cook

For 30 years, the Oakes Test Area (OTA) has provided a wealth of important data imperative to developing the best management practices for irrigated agriculture in North Dakota. OTA is an irrigation research site located near Oakes in southeast North Dakota.

WHAT IS THE OAKES TEST AREA?

OTA came about when the International Joint Commission recommended the establishment of a facility to study the effects of Garrison Diversion Unit (GDU) irrigation. The irrigation research site was developed in 1980 by the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) in cooperation with state and federal agencies. Prior to irrigation delivery, data collection and monitoring was completed to document pre-development conditions.

Irrigation delivery began at OTA in the spring of 1988 after completion of a subsurface drainage system and water distribution system. In 1994, Reclamation's director of research determined that original research objectives had been met, and it was no longer in Reclamation's interest to continue this research. Reclamation discontinued funding research in OTA at the end of 1995. This decision was supported by an environmental assessment and decision document, which also stated Reclamation's intent to



transfer title of the OTA facilities. It also stated that if title transfer cannot be accomplished, water deliveries would be discontinued and the facilities would be abandoned.

QUESTIONABLE FUTURE OF OTA

The future of OTA is questionable at this time. Limited water supplies have prevented OTA from reaching its full potential. While OTA is authorized to irrigate up to 5,000 acres, limited water supplies have prevented the test area from reaching its full potential. Anywhere from 500 to 4,300 irrigated acres have been irrigated from 1988 through today, though in 2012, 4,529 acres were irrigated, making it a record year for OTA.

In order for OTA to irrigate a consistent number of acres, a more reliable water supply needs to be secured. OTA utilizes water from the James River and groundwater through temporary water permits acquired from the North Dakota State Water Commission. Interim water sources include Jamestown Reservoir storage (when available in accordance with the Operating Principles for the OTA from the James River), surplus James River flows, flows captured from the OTA drainage system, and water from the interim water supply wells, which depend upon natural recharge and artificial recharge of the Oakes Aquifer using surplus James River flows.

Alternatives are being considered to secure future water supply options for irrigation in OTA. In a dry year, OTA could potentially be without a water supply, so the level of investment to be made in the facilities is questionable.

TITLE TRANSFER OF FACILITIES

While Reclamation owns OTA, the Garrison Diversion Conservancy District (Garrison Diversion) Operation and Maintenance staff performs the daily operations, which includes operating pumps, servicing equipment and maintaining the extensive system of subsurface pipe drains. Since federal funding was eliminated for OTA in 2011, irrigators within the Dickey-Sargent Irrigation District (DSID) came to an agreement with Reclamation to assume all O&M costs associated with OTA. DSID is now responsible for all operations and maintenance costs for the irrigation system at OTA.

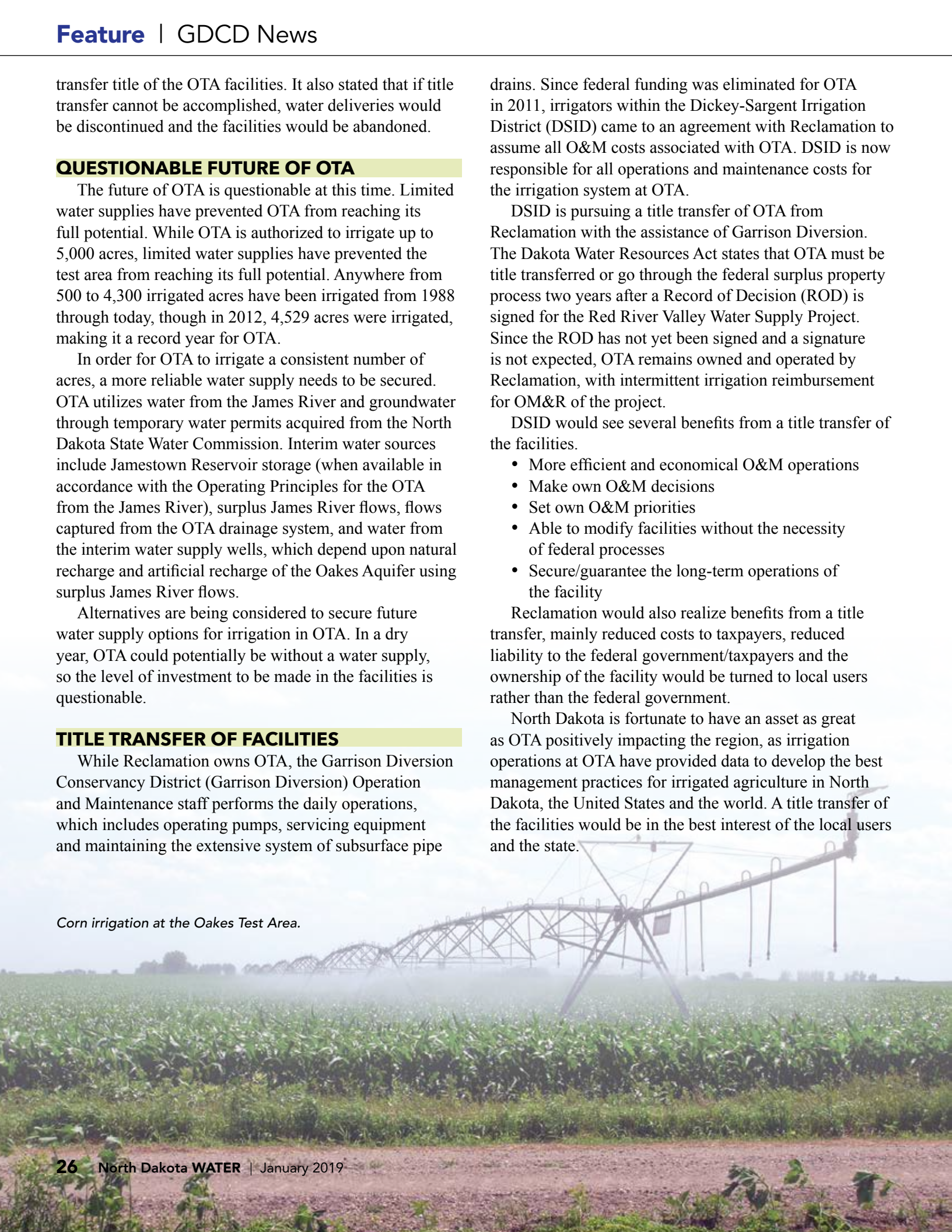
DSID is pursuing a title transfer of OTA from Reclamation with the assistance of Garrison Diversion. The Dakota Water Resources Act states that OTA must be title transferred or go through the federal surplus property process two years after a Record of Decision (ROD) is signed for the Red River Valley Water Supply Project. Since the ROD has not yet been signed and a signature is not expected, OTA remains owned and operated by Reclamation, with intermittent irrigation reimbursement for OM&R of the project.

DSID would see several benefits from a title transfer of the facilities.

- More efficient and economical O&M operations
- Make own O&M decisions
- Set own O&M priorities
- Able to modify facilities without the necessity of federal processes
- Secure/guarantee the long-term operations of the facility

Reclamation would also realize benefits from a title transfer, mainly reduced costs to taxpayers, reduced liability to the federal government/taxpayers and the ownership of the facility would be turned to local users rather than the federal government.

North Dakota is fortunate to have an asset as great as OTA positively impacting the region, as irrigation operations at OTA have provided data to develop the best management practices for irrigated agriculture in North Dakota, the United States and the world. A title transfer of the facilities would be in the best interest of the local users and the state.



Corn irrigation at the Oakes Test Area.

Dale Esser Receives Recognition for Excellence in Irrigation

At the 55th annual Joint Water Convention and Irrigation Expo hosted by the North Dakota Water Users Association, Dale Esser was the recipient of the Irrigation Excellence Award, given by the North Dakota Irrigation Association. Dale has played an instrumental role in irrigation research and development in North Dakota since he began his career as an irrigation advisor in Oakes in 1988, where he made an important contribution to the overall effort in the distribution and education of irrigation best management practices to irrigators.

He then spent many years as Garrison Diversion's operations and maintenance supervisor at the Oakes Test Area, a 5,000-acre irrigation test site. He became involved with the Dickey-Sargent Irrigation District Board of Directors, where he has served as secretary for a number of years.

In 2010, Dale was named Garrison Diversion's irrigation specialist. He spent countless hours working on the McClusky Canal Irrigation Project and, more recently, the Master Irrigation Plan, which identifies further irrigation potential along the McClusky Canal.

Overall, Dale has been responsible for the development, operations and maintenance of nearly 10,000 acres of irrigation in North Dakota. His expertise in all aspects of irrigation, from identifying soil types to dealing with landowners, troubleshooting complex irrigation systems and board operations, has been invaluable to Garrison Diversion and irrigators alike.

Dale, we congratulate you on this honor and thank you for your contribution to irrigation development across the state.

Dale Esser receives Irrigation Excellence Award