

OAKES TEST AREA

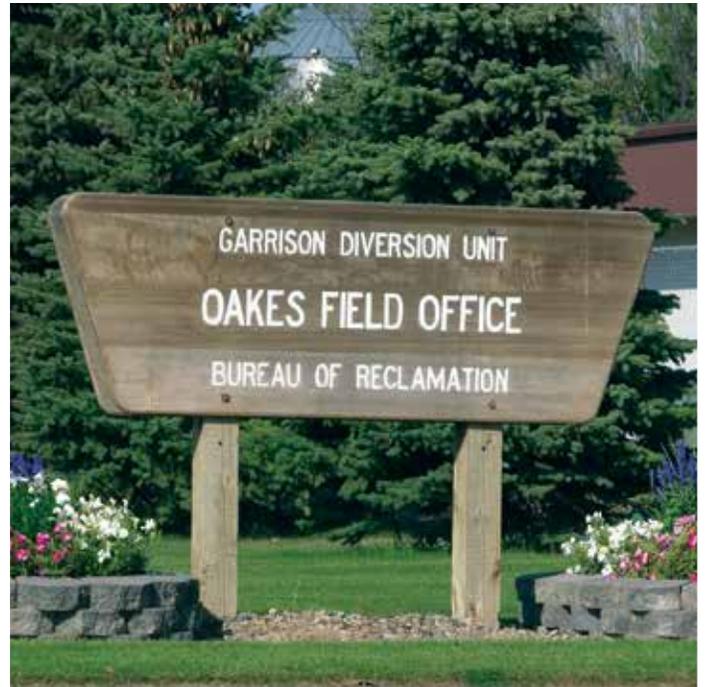
Title Transfer Forthcoming

By Kimberly Cook

The Oakes Test Area (OTA) is an irrigation research site located near Oakes in southeast North Dakota. For more than 40 years, it has provided a wealth of important data imperative to developing the best management practices for irrigated agriculture in North Dakota.

The OTA has been owned by the US Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) since it was developed in 1980; however, the Department of Interior recently notified Congress of its intent to transfer ownership of the OTA to the Dickey-Sargent Irrigation District (DSID). Congress has 90 days to review the transfer before it is finalized and the DSID takes ownership.

The Lands Package signed by President Donald Trump in March 2019 has allowed the title transfer to move forward, as the legislation removes the need for congressional authorization prior to transferring the title of a Reclamation project facility such as the OTA. The Lands Package aligns with legislation introduced by Sen. John Hoeven, with Sen. Kevin Cramer as an original cosponsor, to authorize the title transfer of the facility to the DSID.



The irrigation research site was developed by Reclamation in cooperation with state and federal agencies as a 5,000-acre irrigation test site designed to study best management irrigation practices, water quality and management, and wetlands and wildlife. Prior to irrigation delivery, data collection and monitoring was completed to document pre-development conditions. Irrigation delivery began at the OTA in the spring of 1988, after the completion of a subsurface drainage system and water distribution system. Over the years, a variety of crops have been irrigated, most notably, corn, soybeans, dry beans, onions, and potatoes.

Since 1988, the number of acres irrigated at the test site has varied significantly. While the OTA is authorized to irrigate up to 5,000 acres, limited water supplies have prevented the test area from reaching its full potential and the test area has only irrigated between 500 to 4,500 acres per year.

Because federal funding was eliminated for the Oakes Test Area in 2011, irrigators within the DSID came to an agreement with Reclamation to assume all operations and maintenance (O&M) costs associated with the OTA. Since then, the DSID has been responsible for all O&M costs for the irrigation system at the OTA.

The title transfer will allow the DSID to make

upgrades and maintenance to get the irrigation system up to modern standards. Benefits of the title transfer include more efficient and economical O&M operations, the ability for DSID to make and set their own O&M decisions and priorities, and the ability to modify facilities without undergoing federal process. Transferring the federal facility to local ownership benefits the federal government as well, resulting in saving taxpayer dollars due to decreased operating costs and reduced liability.

Negotiating the title transfer was a long process, but Sen. Hoeven kept the ball rolling in the right direction. Other agencies involved in the process include the Department of Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, Dickey-Sargent Irrigation District, and Garrison Diversion Conservancy District. Sen. Cramer and Rep. Kelly Armstrong joined Sen. Hoeven on a telephone conference announcing the transfer.

The irrigation district will pay \$44,000 for the Oakes Test Area. The low price comes as maintenance and replacement fees were factored into the final price, as well as the lack of a sufficient water supply.

The Garrison Diversion Conservancy District Operation and Maintenance staff continues to assist with daily operations, which include operating pumps, servicing equipment and maintaining the extensive system of subsurface pipe drains.

