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Idaho Water Board approves \$10.5 million for Snake Plain Aquifer recharge projects in FY 2016

IDAHO FALLS – (May 28, 2015) – The Idaho Water Resource Board adopted a \$10.5 million budget for fiscal year 2016 to expand Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA) recharge projects and develop aquifer stabilization projects statewide.

Set during the Board's two-day meeting in Idaho Falls, May 21-22, the budget includes \$6.25 million in recharge infrastructure development and improvements and \$1.2 million for recharge operations on the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer.

The \$6.25 million in aquifer recharge infrastructure development and improvements will go toward six projects:

- Milner-Gooding Canal - Concrete flume rehabilitation and bypass structures for hydropower plants
- Twin Falls Canal recharge improvements
- Northside Canal hydro plant bypasses
- Great Feeder Canal recharge improvements
- Milner Pool development and other projects
- Egin Recharge enlargement within the Fremont-Madison Irrigation District

In addition, the board approved \$300,000 for investigation of additional aquifer recharge capacity and \$200,000 for ground water conservation grants.

All the improvements are designed to increase the capacity of the Water Board's managed aquifer program, which went into full-scale operation during the past winter. The Board placed top priority on shovel-ready projects that can be implemented in the near term while initiating the necessary technical planning efforts to develop long-term projects.

"All of these projects will fund important infrastructure improvements to allow for increased aquifer recharge activities in the coming year," Water Board Chairman Roger Chase said.

The Board is focused on issues in areas of the state with declining aquifers or that have existing or potential water use conflicts between ground water and surface water users. The ESPA is the most widely known among these declining aquifers. Other areas with ground water level concerns include the Big Wood River, Mountain Home area, Treasure Valley, and Palouse basin.

The volume of water in the ESPA has been declining by about 200,000 acre-feet per year since the early 1950s. The declines are attributed to changes in irrigation practices, increased ground water pumping, and periodic drought cycles. The transition from flood irrigation to sprinkler irrigation along with a shift from the delivery of surface water through unlined canals to ground water pumping significantly reduced the amount of seepage, or "incidental recharge," that historically helped to replenish the aquifer.

The ESPA is an important source of drinking water for cities and rural residents, commercial and industrial businesses, and ground water irrigators. The reduction of incidental recharge and increased ground water pumping from the aquifer has led to a reduction in spring flow near American Falls Reservoir and Thousand Springs near Hagerman. Springs are a critical source of water for aquaculture operations in the vicinity, and they provide a major source of water for the Snake River downstream. Stabilization of the ESPA is critical to prevent future ground water user-versus-surface water user conflicts and to maintain minimum flow requirements in the Snake River at Swan Falls.

In addition to aquifer recharge, the Board is pursuing other strategies such as ground water-to-surface water conversions, conservation/water demand reductions, weather modification (cloud seeding), and surface water storage to promote aquifer stabilization and sustainability.

In other action, the Water Board:

- Approved a \$500,000 loan increase for improvements for a water delivery system in the Preston, Idaho area as part of the Board's Financial Program.
- Approved funding for a pipeline concept study for a project to provide reliable water supplies to the Mountain Home Air Force Base.

Board members also toured potential managed recharge sites within the Fremont-Madison Irrigation District and Great Feeder Canal Company.

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