



NEWS RELEASE - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Brian Patton, Chief, Planning & Projects Bureau, 208-287-4800

Idaho Water Board discusses drought and aquifer issues in North and South Idaho

POST FALLS, Idaho (July 17, 2015) – Drought in the Idaho Panhandle has made it more difficult for water managers to maintain summertime lake levels for homeowners and recreationists and also provide enough streamflow below the lakes this summer, the Idaho Water Resource Board learned in its July meeting here this week.

During its meeting, the Water Board toured sites within the Rathdrum Prairie Aquifer and Spokane River system where they learned about the water management challenges facing North Idaho. Low snowpack and streamflows have measured 10-20 percent of normal this year. "It's a difficult balancing act to provide enough water for full lake levels and adequate stream flows, which has been exacerbated by drought conditions in North Idaho this year," said Brian Patton, Chief of the Planning and Projects Bureau for the Idaho Water Resource Board.

The Board also learned about the complexities of the Rathdrum Prairie and Spokane Valley Aquifers which interact closely with the Spokane River. Spokane River flows from Lake Coeur d'Alene naturally seep into the aquifer as the river flows west into Washington, significantly reducing river flows until water begins to come back to the river from the aquifer near Greenacres gage to the City of Spokane gage.

"The flows in the Spokane River in this stretch are more dictated by aquifer recharge and discharge than surface water from Coeur d'Alene Lake and Post Falls Dam," said Roger Chase, Chairman of the Water Resource Board. "The dynamics of the geologic foundation of the river and the aquifer rule the day."

Due to the complexity of the aquifer and river system, officials in both Idaho and Washington monitor groundwater levels in the aquifer and how groundwater pumping impacts river flows. The Board heard an update from Idaho Department of Water Resources staff on the Rathdrum Prairie Aquifer 28-well groundwater monitoring network.

Paul Kimmell from the Palouse Basin Aquifer Committee provided an update on efforts to initiate a study of alternatives to address declining aquifer levels and increase water supplies. The Palouse Basin Aquifer has been dropping continuously since the 1890s. It has dropped 40 feet in the last 40 years. The Palouse groundwater basin is the sole source of water for more than 60,000 residents of Moscow, Pullman, Wash., and the outlying areas of Latah County, Idaho, and Whitman County, Wash.

"The Board is focused on supporting water projects statewide and understanding the water supply and management challenges facing water users across the state," said Chase.

The Board also addressed ongoing aquifer stabilization efforts in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA). The ESPA is an important source of drinking water for cities and rural residents, commercial and industrial businesses, and groundwater irrigators. Spring flows from the ESPA aquifer are a critical source of water for aquaculture operations in the Magic Valley, and they provide a major source of surface water for the Snake River downstream.

The Water Board approved spending \$1.05 million to make three improvements to boost recharge capacity in the Milner Canal system, operated by American Falls Reservoir District No. 2, north of Twin Falls. Recharge in the canal and at the Milepost 31 and Shoshone recharge sites is helping to restore groundwater levels in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer, which is losing about 200,000 acre-feet of water storage per year. The groundwater declines are attributed to changes in irrigation practices, increased groundwater pumping, and periodic drought cycles.

The first improvement project would add an additional diversion structure from the Milner-Gooding Canal into the Milepost 31 recharge basin, increasing the capacity of the recharge site from 150 cfs to a least 250 cfs during the winter months. The Board also approved sealing cracks in a 3-mile concrete flume to allow the use of the Shoshone Recharge site during the winter, and it approved funds to gravel the canal road to allow safe access throughout the winter.

"The Milepost 31 recharge site is one of the most productive recharge projects in the Eastern Snake Plain area, so it makes sense for the Board to support these improvements that will expand recharge and provide continuous access to it for maintenance and operations," said Patton.

The Water Board also learned on Tuesday that concerns about maintaining minimum flows at the Murphy gauge in the Swan Falls reach of the Snake River are easing for this year, compared to earlier predictions. At one point, IDWR staff indicated that the Snake might fall below the 3,900 cfs minimum flow for April-October by as much as 29 days this summer because of low snowpack and runoff. It now appears that the critical period has passed and that flows are increasing due to a combination of higher than expected spring discharges in the ESPA resulting, in part, from reduced demand on groundwater in response to late-spring rains and earlier than expected surface water returns to the river as the result of higher than expected demand for surface water in early-spring.

In other action, the Water Board approved nearly \$4 million in water project loans in an effort to support the Bear and Malad basins in Southeast Idaho:

- Approved a \$2.5 million loan at 3.5 percent interest to the Last Chance Canal Company. to replace a 100-year-old timber-crib diversion structure with a new concrete diversion structure. The project is located near Grace in Southeast Idaho. Last Chance Canal Co. delivers water from the Bear River to 147 shareholders covering 29,000 acres of farm land.
- Approved a \$1.4 million loan at 3.5 percent interest to the St. John's Irrigating Company (SJIC), near Malad City, to replace portions of an existing canal system with approximately 7-miles of pressurized conveyance pipeline to provide water savings for the Company. The loan will provide matching cost-share funds for a \$1 million WaterSmart Water and Efficiency Grant from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. The total estimated cost of the pipeline project is \$2,429,775. St. John's serves 3,500 acres of farmland in Oneida County.

#####