



NEWS RELEASE - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Idaho Water Board expects to recharge 80,000 acre-feet in Winter 2016

BOISE - (Feb. 2, 2016) - The Idaho Water Resource Board is hoping to increase the amount of water recharged into the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer in the winter of 2015-2016, with a target of 80,000 acre-feet of water. Since October, approximately 36,000 acre-feet of water has been returned to the aquifer.

The target could have been higher this winter. However, infrastructure projects being built to improve recharge capacity have limited delivery of recharge water. The number of canals and recharge basins capable of delivering increased recharge flows won't be available until next year, said Wesley Hipke, recharge project manager for the Idaho Department of Water Resources.

"To reach our goal, we need to bring more projects online," Hipke told the Idaho Water Resource Board's Aquifer Stabilization Committee recently. "In the winter of 2016-2017, the plan is to more than double our current recharge capacity."

Aquifer recharge will help stabilize declining water levels in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA), a vast subterranean water body that underlies the Snake River Plain from Ashton to Hagerman. Recharge is accomplished by delivering water via unlined irrigation canals and dedicated spreading basins where it is allowed to seep into the aquifer. The Water Resource Board's ultimate goal is to recharge 250,000 acre-feet per year into the ESPA.

Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter recently increased his FY 2017 Executive Budget request to help accelerate recharge and other aquifer stabilization projects.

ESPA recharge projects also are a cornerstone of the recent historic water settlement agreement between surface water and ground water irrigators in the ESPA area. Under the settlement agreement, ground water pumpers committed to reducing use of water by 240,000 acre-feet per year. This coming irrigation season will be the first year of implementation. The reduction in consumptive use, combined with the Idaho Water Resource Board's goal of 250,000 acre-feet per year of recharge, are designed to stabilize and replenish the aquifer.

“All water users understand that this is about sustainability and the health of the aquifer,” Idaho House of Representatives Speaker Scott Bedke said. “I appreciate Governor Otter revising his budget recommendation to reflect the urgent need to address this critical issue.”

“This action will accelerate crucial water recharge efforts and enhance our aquifers so they become truly sustainable resources for Idaho citizens, municipalities, businesses and agriculture,” Senate Resources and Environment Committee Chairman Steve Bair said.

There now are two canal companies participating in recharge in the mid-Snake region, including the Milner-Gooding Canal operated by the American Falls Reservoir District No. 2 and Twin Falls Canal Co. The North Side Canal Company and Southwest Irrigation District conducted recharge at the start of the season but shut down during the coldest months. They plan to restart in the spring. Future projects are being considered that would allow these entities to recharge through the winter.

The Milner-Gooding canal has the most capacity to deliver recharge water. "It is our main workhorse," Hipke said. IDWR staff, in partnership with the operators of the Milner-Gooding Canal, is taking steps to improve the canal so the recharge site near the town of Shoshone can be utilized in the winter of 2016-2017. Staff estimates the project could recharge as much as 300 cfs, more than doubling the recharge capacity of the Milner-Gooding Canal.

In the Upper Snake River Valley, three construction projects are under way to boost recharge capacity, among other things:

- New head gates are being built in the Great Feeder Canal near Rigby at an approximate cost of \$1.2million at the main diversion location on the South Fork of the Snake River. The new head gates were needed for basic canal operations but they also will help with recharge. The Water Board is contributing \$500,000 to that project.
- New flow control structures and measurement devices are being installed at the Jenson Grove spreading basin in Blackfoot next to I-84 at a cost of \$53,000. The Water Board is contributing \$26,500 to that project.
- A new recharge canal is being built in the Egin Lakes recharge area near St. Anthony to increase recharge capacity from 50 cfs to 150 cfs per year. The Water Board is paying for the full cost of that \$1,030,000 project because it is being built solely for recharge. The Water Board will have exclusive rights to use the Egin Lakes recharge area when the Board’s water is available.

The Water Board has a water right for approximately 1,200 cubic feet per second to divert water from the Snake River for recharge. While it provides water for recharge throughout the winter in the lower part of the basin, it is difficult to predict the amount of water that will be available for recharge in the Upper Valley because, in that location, the Board’s water right is generally only in priority during above-normal water years. Water Board officials are not counting on any recharge water to be available in the Upper Valley this year because runoff is expected to be used to fill the reservoir system.

The Egin Lakes project is scheduled to be completed by March and will be operable if surplus flows are available for recharge, Hipke said. "The idea is to create as much recharge infrastructure as possible so we can recharge water when we have it," he said.

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