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IDWR Director creates Ground Water Management Area in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer region

BOISE - (Nov. 4, 2016) – Idaho Department of Water Resources Director Gary Spackman signed an order on Wednesday creating a Ground Water Management Area (GWMA) for the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA) region, saying more needs to be done to restore the aquifer.

“By designating a ground water management area in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer region, we bring all of the water users into the fold – cities, water districts and others – who may be affecting aquifer levels through their consumptive use,” Spackman told the Idaho Water Users Association on Thursday.

“As we’ve continued to collect and analyze water data through the years, we don’t see recovery happening in the ESPA. We’re losing 200,000 acre-feet of water per year,” Spackman said. “At some point, we can’t deny the reality that we need to do more to stop the drop.”

Spackman said creating a GWMA will embrace the terms of a historic water settlement between the Surface Water Coalition and ground water users. “I don’t think this order is contrary to the practices, goals and implementation of the settlement agreement or creates any new obligations for those water users,” he said.

But the GWMA for the ESPA will seek to bring other water users under management who have not joined a ground water district, including some cities. “All water users will be provided the opportunity to participate in the creation of a ground water management plan with the goal of restoring the aquifer,” Spackman said.

The ESPA provides a federally designated “sole source” of drinking water for hundreds of thousands of southern Idaho residents, and a vital resource for farmers, ranchers and others who rely upon water for a living.

Idaho Department of Water Resources (IDWR) officials held a series of ten public meetings in communities overlying the ESPA or in tributary basins last summer to inform water users of continuing declines in aquifer levels and to discuss the possibility of IDWR designating a GWMA.

The boundaries of the GWMA for the ESPA region are shown in a map listed as Attachment A in the director's order (see attached map). The map extends from points east of Dubois and St. Anthony in eastern Idaho across the Snake River Plain to the Thousand Springs region, where waters from the ESPA discharge into the Snake River. Existing ground water management areas or critical ground water management areas that overlap the ESPA have been excluded from the ESPA Ground Water Management Area to avoid redundant administrative efforts, Spackman said.

IDWR officials expect it will take one to two years to develop a detailed ground water management plan for the GWMA. The next step is to form an advisory committee of water users representing all interests within the GWMA and to work with that group in developing a ground water management plan, IDWR Deputy Director Mathew Weaver said.

Existing conjunctive management rules and delivery calls have not succeeded in stopping the aquifer decline, Weaver said.

"Mitigation plans often do not include practices and actions that result in increases in water quantity in the resource," he said. "The creation of a ground water management area is the first step in developing a ground water management plan that will have stabilization and recovery of the aquifer as its primary objective."

To read a copy of the director's order on the GWMA for the ESPA, follow this link:

<https://www.idwr.idaho.gov/files/legal/orders/20161102-Order-Designating-the-Eastern-Snake-Plain-Aquifer-GWMA.pdf>

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