



NEWS RELEASE - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Snowpack looks strong in Idaho, except in the Panhandle

\$5.1 million conservation grant to help with water reductions in ESPA region

BOISE - (Jan. 26, 2017) – Heavy precipitation and cold temperatures in December and January have put the water supply for most of Idaho in a strong position for the coming summer irrigation season. While many river basins are well over 100 percent of normal, northern Idaho is lagging behind with only 69 percent of normal in the Panhandle, officials said at the Idaho Water Resource Board meeting this week.

Snow-water equivalent readings for the Upper Snake River region were at 140 percent of normal for the Snake River above Palisades Reservoir and 133 percent of normal in the Henrys Fork Basin, which will help fill Palisades and Island Park reservoirs and others downstream. “We had very low natural flows on some streams by last fall, so it’s very good we’re accumulating snow in the Upper Snake,” said David Hoekema, a hydrologist who briefed the board.

Since the levels of many reservoirs were significantly drawn down by last fall, Palisades was still only 35 percent full as of Tuesday; Jackson Lake was 65 percent full, and American Falls 63 percent full.

Other snow-water equivalent readings included: 171 percent of normal in the Bear River Basin, 123 percent in the Boise, 104 percent in the Payette, 137 percent in the Big Wood, 116 percent in the Weiser, 84 percent in the Clearwater, and 77 percent in the Spokane. Hoekema said the Owyhee River Basin was at 170 percent of normal, which should provide enough water for irrigators this summer.

On a separate issue, the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) announced it is allocating \$5.1 million to the Idaho Water Resource Board’s Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer Stabilization Project. The funds will be held by NRCS and paid to producers as a cost-share for implementing water conservation projects aimed at stabilizing and recovering ground water levels in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA). Some of the projects could help junior ground water users meet the terms of a recent settlement between surface water and ground water users, said Neeley Miller of the board’s water planning staff.

Eligible projects could conserve water through ground-to-surface water conversions, removing end guns on pivot sprinklers, converting irrigated cropland to dryland farming, and fallowing cropland or flood-irrigation enhancements.

The funds will be available in 2018-2020. Applications will be solicited in the fall of 2017 and will be ranked based on criteria set by the board and grant partners, Miller said.

“I’m excited about getting the grant,” Water Resource Board Chairman Roger Chase said. “Anything we can do to help with water conservation in the ESPA area is really important.”

In other action, the board:

- Approved a 50-percent cost-share with the operators of Lost Valley Reservoir near New Meadows to automate the dam’s outlet gate and improve measurement of flow released from the reservoir. The total project cost was \$21,671, and the board funded \$10,836. The improvements will enable reservoir operators to change the amount of water released through the dam without driving more than an hour to do it by hand. The project not only will reduce travel costs, but it also will increase water efficiency and stretch water supplies, officials said.
- Received an update on ESPA recharge operations for the winter of 2016-17. To date, nearly 37,000 acre-feet of water has been recharged into the aquifer. Cold temperatures and heavy ice in canals have hampered efforts to increase recharge flows, said Wesley Hipke, recharge manager for IDWR. Recharge flows will be increased if ice conditions subside in February. With favorable weather conditions, officials predict more than 80,000 acre-feet of recharge can still be accomplished this winter. “We are working closely with canal managers and are prepared to take advantage of available river flow as soon as canal conditions allow more diversion for recharge,” Hipke said.
- Approved close-out of the Boise River Feasibility Study, an evaluation of projects to reduce flood risk and increase water supply in southwestern Idaho’s Treasure Valley. The Board worked with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to perform the study, which focused on the potential of raising the height of the Arrowrock Dam to add both significant flood control capacity in the Boise River reservoir system and more water storage capacity to meet future water demands. After extensive analysis, the Corps determined that the cost of raising the level of the dam exceeded the estimated benefits. The Corps emphasized that while raising the dam could not be justified at this time, significant flood risks still exist in the Treasure Valley and damages resulting from a significant flood event could be considerable. The board encouraged the Corps to continue to work closely with cities, counties and other entities to reduce flood risk in the Treasure Valley.

The board now will consider working with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to further examine raising the level of Boise River reservoirs by smaller amounts to create more water storage capacity. Reclamation estimates a feasibility study would cost \$3.5 million to \$5.5 million. It is performing preliminary water supply yield analyses to present to the Water Resource Board and other potential study partners before initiating another study, Reclamation officials said.

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