



NEWS RELEASE - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Media contact: Steve Stuebner, 208-484-0295 mobile; sstuebner@cableone.net

Idaho Water Resource Board contact: Brian Patton, Chief, Planning Bureau, 208-287-4800;

Idaho Water Board recharges Snake Plain Aquifer with 75,235 acre-feet of water in multiple locations

BOISE - (April 16, 2015) - In the first year of full-scale operations, the Idaho Water Resource Board teamed up with seven canal companies and irrigation districts to recharge the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer with over 75,000 acre-feet of water in the winter of 2014-2015.

Aquifer recharge projects are designed to help stabilize declining water levels in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer, a vast body of ground water that lies under the Snake River Plain from Ashton to Hagerman. Recharge is accomplished by delivering water through both unlined irrigation canals and dedicated spreading basins where it is allowed to seep into the aquifer.

Water from the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer is in high demand by cities and rural residents for drinking water, commercial and industrial businesses and ground water irrigators before it surfaces in the Hagerman area through the Thousand Springs and cascades into the Snake River canyon. Here, many aquaculture operations tap the clean, cool spring water for raising fish in that region. Downstream of the springs, this water forms a major part of the Snake River flow, and is used to generate emission-free hydropower. Since the early 1950s, however, water levels in the aquifer have declined at the rate of 200,000 acre-feet per year, impacting ground water pumpers as well as reducing spring flows.

Idaho Water Resource Board officials were pleased to accomplish as much recharge volume as they did, considering that mountain snowpack in the Upper Snake region started strong and then dwindled during a dry February and March.

"This winter should be viewed as the first time we took recharge efforts from a pilot scale to a full-scale operation," said Brian Patton, chief of the planning bureau for the Idaho Water Resource Board. "We want to compliment our recharge partners for assisting with this effort. The success of this year will build in the years to come, as long as we expand the effort to stabilize the aquifer."

The Water Board worked with two canal companies and one irrigation district to recharge approximately 14,000 acre-feet of surplus water in the upper Snake River valley above American Falls Reservoir, and two districts and two canal companies in the lower valley to recharge over 61,000 acre-feet of water. An acre-foot is the amount of water it takes to flood one acre of land to the depth of one foot, or roughly the size of a football field flooded to the depth of one foot.

Patton notes that the canal companies and irrigation districts had to be quick and nimble in delivering the recharge water. The Water Board has a water right for approximately 1,200 cubic feet per second of recharge flow in the winter. For a two-week period between February 18 and March 4, all the recharge projects combined came close to reaching that target flow.

The Twin Falls Canal Company and American Falls Reservoir District #2 recharged the most water across the Eastern Snake Plain region, starting in late October and continuing through the third week of March. The two projects combined sent more than 50,000 acre-feet of water into the aquifer, or two-thirds of the total.

The first year of full-scale operations was made possible by funding appropriations by the Idaho Legislature in 2014, kicking off the Water Board's Water Sustainability Initiative for the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer. Recharging the aquifer has broad support from diverse interests.

"It doesn't make any difference if you're a domestic user, ground water pumper, surface water irrigator, or aquaculture, the recharge projects if we can get the kind of water we need into the aquifer, and stabilize the levels, it's a benefit for the entire state," says Lynn Harmon, general manager of American Falls District #2, which operates the Milner-Gooding Irrigation Canal.

"To me, we no longer have a model of incidental recharge – letting it happen as it did over the last century," Idaho Falls Mayor Rebecca Casper said. "We need managed recharge. It's the cheapest, easiest way to go."

Indeed, the funding provided by the Legislature helped achieve greater results by providing incentives to canal companies to deliver recharge water during winter months, Water Board officials said.

"The Legislature realized we'd better do something and they graciously gave us an appropriation that allows us to build bigger and better aquifer recharge sites, find ways to conserve water, and really to start managing the water more effectively, importantly, with more money," said Roger Chase, chairman of the Water Board.

"One of the best things that happened is the Legislature setting aside money for aquifer recharge," said Louis Zamora of the Twin Falls Canal Co. "We are being compensated because it is added maintenance and liability for us to run water in the winter."

The Comprehensive Aquifer Management Plan for the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer espouses a goal of 250,000 acre-feet of recharge per year, when surplus flows exist. "We still have a lot of work to do in the future," Patton said. "But this was a good start."

For more information, see the Idaho Water Board's [Comprehensive Aquifer Management Plan for the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer](https://www.idwr.idaho.gov/waterboard/WaterPlanning/CAMP/ESPA/default.htm). <https://www.idwr.idaho.gov/waterboard/WaterPlanning/CAMP/ESPA/default.htm>

#####



Louis Zamora of the Twin Falls Canal Company explains that this was the first time in 50 years that the canal company ran water down their canal for aquifer recharge.



Milepost 31 recharge project on the Milner-Gooding Canal operated by American Falls District #2.



The Great Feeder Canal east of Idaho Falls contributed to the Water Board's aquifer recharge program in the winter of 2014-2015.