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

Idaho Water Resource Board discusses solutions to Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer issues in workshop

TWIN FALLS – (Sept 23, 2015) – The Idaho Water Resource Board hosted a workshop last week to discuss solutions to declining ground water levels in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA) that have resulted in significant water delivery calls that could threaten Idaho’s economy.

The half-day workshop was led by House Speaker Scott Bedke and Roger Chase, chairman of the Idaho Water Resource Board, and attended by 14 legislators from the ESPA area. Water Board members, water users and legislators heard about the history of aquifer declines, projects under way by the Water Resource Board and others to help stabilize the aquifer, and details about settlements between surface and ground water users in the Hagerman area and Eastern Snake Plain intended to both restore aquifer levels and eliminate the need for delivery calls.

After the workshop, the group toured selected projects aimed at stabilizing and recovering the aquifer and meeting the terms of the settlement agreements. The group visited the Rangen-Magic Springs Pump Station and Pipeline constructed by 10 ground water districts in the ESPA area to provide mitigation water to the Rangen, Inc., trout farm in the Hagerman Valley. The tour also included a visit to the Shoshone Recharge Site, located northeast of the city of Shoshone. The site can recharge 300 cfs of water delivered via the Milner-Gooding Canal. It will be a primary location used by the Water Board to deliver recharge water for aquifer-stabilization purposes during the winter months after a canal rehabilitation project this winter.

In a related action, the Water Board approved a \$4 million interim loan to assist ground water districts in financing the Rangen-Magic Springs Pipeline. The Board also approved the expenditure of \$500,000 to assist with recharge conveyance infrastructure within the Great Feeder Canal on the South Fork of the Snake River to facilitate delivery of recharge water under the Water Board’s recharge water right.

Additionally, the Water Board approved funding up to \$200,000 for a one-year pilot project for aircraft-

based cloud-seeding activities in the Upper Snake to augment existing ground-based cloud-seeding efforts.

The Water Board also authorized creation of a statewide ground water conservation grant program to provide financial assistance to municipalities and other eligible entities interested in pursuing projects that help reduce ground water demands. Beginning in October, grant applications will be available on the Idaho Department of Water Resources (IDWR) Web site. Applications received by Dec. 15, 2015, will be reviewed by the Water Resource Board for funding in fiscal year 2016.

All these projects support the ESPA stabilization effort and the ESPA Comprehensive Aquifer Management Plan. The ground water conservation grants will be made available on other priority aquifers as well.

The Water Resource Board also oversees the Idaho Water Supply Bank, which is used extensively in the Wood River Valley to facilitate temporary changes water rights. At the meeting, the Water Resource Board authorized implementation of an updated version of the interim ground water rental policy next year. The updated policy will provide guidance for the temporary movement of water rights to new locations. The Board hopes to be able to integrate a new ground water model being developed by IDWR and the U.S. Geological Survey when the policy is revisited next year.

As a follow up to other actions, IDWR Director Gary Spackman provided an update on the outcome of summer operations of Priest Lake. Due to drought conditions in northern Idaho, IDWR – which operates the Priest Lake outlet structure – was forced to balance the release of water into the Priest River with maintenance of lake levels required under Idaho law. Ultimately, conditions allowed IDWR to continue releasing some flow into the river while maintaining the Priest Lake level at or slightly below the required level.

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