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IWRB tours Teton Dam site to highlight Upper Snake River Basin study of potential water storage projects, approves two ESPA recharge projects

BOISE – (Aug. 10, 2026) – The Idaho Water Resource Board (IWRB) toured the Teton Dam site with Bureau of Reclamation officials last week to highlight an Upper Snake River Basin study that’s now getting under way to look at new surface water storage projects.

Rebuilding Teton Dam, which failed 50 years ago on June 5, 1976, will be one of the options explored in the study, in addition to adding elevation to existing dams, such as Minidoka, or other alternatives.

Bureau of Reclamation officials talked about the failure of Teton Dam in a presentation to the IWRB on Thursday. The fractured volcanic rock on the dam’s abutments had many holes and fissures that the Bureau’s contractors tried to fill with grout and locally sourced silty soil and rock materials during construction. But there was tremendous pressure to keep the construction on schedule and keep costs down, officials said.

The 405-foot-tall earth-filled dam was completed in the fall of 1975. The reservoir filled rapidly the following spring, with heavy snowpack in the 190% of normal range. Water seepage was seen trickling through the dam’s north abutment area on the morning of June 5th. By noon, the dam had ruptured and failed. The incident killed 11 people and more than 13,000 cattle, flooded 10,000 people, and causing approximately \$2 billion in damages.

Reclamation officials said it might be possible to rebuild Teton Dam in the same location with a rockfill dam or concrete structure. Once the final options are identified in the Upper Snake River Basin study, congressional approval will be needed to finance the solutions, officials said.

“We’ll be looking at the whole system in the Upper Snake,” said Michael Hilliard with Reclamation. “The study will be heavy on water modeling to evaluate future water demand and ways to meet that demand.”

In other action, the IWRB approved two projects that would increase aquifer-recharge capacity in the Upper Snake Valley and help meet the Board’s goal of recharging an average of 350,000 acre-feet of water into the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA) on an annual basis.

1. The Snake River Valley Irrigation District (SRVID) old sugar factory recharge basin, located 1 mile southeast of Shelley, was approved for approximately \$8 million. An 85-acre infiltration basin would be created with 9-foot earthen berms around the perimeter of the site. SRVID would also build a 3,080-foot pipeline to convey water from its canal one-half mile away to the recharge site. Two groundwater monitoring wells would be built at the site to track water quality; a groundwater monitoring plan will be created and submitted to the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) for approval. When recharge water is available, the site could send up to about 87 cubic feet per second (cfs) into the aquifer, officials said.
2. Two 32-acre aquifer-recharge infiltration basins on one site, proposed by the Bingham Groundwater District (BGWD), were approved for about \$6.3 million. The project includes purchasing a 110-acre parcel, excavating two basins, constructing a dedicated delivery pipeline, improving a canal, and purchasing grass seed and irrigation infrastructure for 9-foot berms to be built around the perimeter of the site. The two basins are expected to recharge about 67 cfs into the aquifer when water is available. A groundwater monitoring plan for the basin will need to be created and submitted to Idaho DEQ for approval.

The Board’s investment in those two ESPA recharge projects was provided by the Idaho Legislature as part of \$30 million in funds earmarked to assist water users in meeting the terms of the 2024 water settlement agreement in the Magic Valley and Eastern Idaho.

In other action, the IWRB approved adding a second aircraft for the Idaho Collaborative Cloud Seeding Program with Idaho Power Co. , to be located in the Upper Snake region. The second aircraft would complement the use of 25 cloud seeding ground generators in the region, officials said.

The IWRB also approved the second year of a pilot cloud seeding project with the Utah Division of Water Resources in the Bear River Basin for \$1.2 million. That project will feature the use of 10 drone teams from Utah’s cloud seeding contractor, Rainmaker, and a total of 30 drones carrying cloud-seeding flares. Board officials directed that an emphasis should be placed on cloud-seeding around the Bear Lake area to benefit water storage in the Bear River Basin.

IWRB members are hoping to do everything possible with the cloud seeding program to help refill Upper Snake reservoirs after the hot and dry summer of 2026, officials said. The Upper Snake reservoirs are currently 31% full and getting drained by 24,000 acre-feet of water a day.

“I’m expecting that we’ll be out of storage by the end of August,” said James Cefalo, IDWR Eastern Regional Manager.

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