NEWS RELEASE - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Idaho Water Resource Board tours Bear River Basin, Bear Lake while exploring ways to increase water supply in the region

SODA SPRINGS – (July 29, 2024) – The Idaho Water Resource Board (Board) toured the Bear River Basin and Bear Lake last week and discussed ways to increase water supply in the region. One potential option is to increase water storage in Bear Lake and another is to explore cloud seeding to augment the high-elevation snowpack, officials said.

The Board held its regular bimonthly meeting in Soda Springs on Thursday and Friday to discuss those topics and other water management activities that involve neighboring states, multiple water user groups and partner agencies in the Bear River Basin.

The Bear River yields about 800,000 acre-feet of water per year, on average, to the Great Salt Lake, while Bear Lake stores about 1.4 million acre-feet at full pool, said Matt Anders, Bureau Chief of Technical Services for the Idaho Department of Water Resources (IDWR).

The Bear River crosses state lines 5 times in its 350-mile course, Anders noted. From the headwaters in the Uinta Mountains in Utah, the Bear River flows through a corner of Southwest Wyoming, then makes a big U-shaped course through the corner of Southeast Idaho, before it flows back into Utah and drains into the Great Salt Lake. A three-state compact defines how water is allocated to the three states. (see map on page 3)

The Bear River supports irrigation, hydropower, native fish and recreation. Bear Lake is popular with boaters and beach goers from Utah, with the city of Logan (population 55,000), 35 miles away. It's also a popular getaway for Idaho residents in this rural corner of the state. The Bear River is the largest tributary of the Great Salt Lake, which has been reeling from low lake levels in recent years, Utah officials said.

The Board is exploring the possibility of adding storage to Bear Lake to provide more water for irrigation and other uses. The Board filed for a water right in Bear Lake for that purpose, but the channel capacity of the Bear River would need to be increased from 1,500 cubic feet per second (cfs) to 2,600 cfs to make that possible, Anders said. Flood easements would need to be negotiated with landowners along the river in the Gentile Valley for that to occur. Efforts to obtain the necessary easements are ongoing.

The Board is also exploring whether cloud seeding in the Bear River Basin could provide a benefit to Idaho water users. A Board-funded feasibility and design study was completed by the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) in 2023 to assess whether cloud seeding could increase water supply in the basin. The study found that there are opportunities to cloud seed with both ground generators and aircraft. There also is potential to share infrastructure for cloud seeding in the Upper Snake region with the State of Utah, said Kala Golden, cloud seeding program manager for IDWR.

The development of comprehensive ground and aircraft operations has been shown to be the most effective way to enhance water supply with cloud seeding, Golden said. However, there is a need to collect real operational data and then assess whether cloud seeding will support long-term water supply enhancement goals.

“There are a number of studies out there that indicate a well-managed and scientifically based cloud seeding project can increase winter precipitation on average about 10 percent,” Golden said. “NCAR has found there to be good opportunities for seeding in the basin, so I think it’s reasonable to assume we could see similar output from what NCAR has proposed.”

The State of Utah is also actively working to grow operations in the basin by adding 10 remote ground generators in Idaho to benefit flows into the Great Salt Lake, officials said.

“This is a project that’s near and dear to my heart,” said Marc Gibbs, an Idaho Water Resource Resource Board member who farms in the Grace area in the Bear River Basin. “I think this is an opportunity that we need to pursue.”

IDWR staff also provided an update on the Bear River Basin Adjudication (BRBA), which commenced July 2021. The BRBA includes both surface and groundwater rights in the portions of Bannock, Bear Lake, Caribou, Cassia, Franklin, Oneida, and Power Counties within the Bear River Basin. This includes IDWR Administrative Basins 11, 13, 15, and 17. The purpose of the water rights adjudication is to determine the nature, extent and priority of surface and ground water rights to allow for effective management of the resource In IDWR’s Basins 11 and 13.

There are an estimated 3,745 active water rights in the area; about 2,865 claims have been filed through the adjudication so far. Claims evaluations in Basins 11 and 13 are expected to be complete in 2031. Adjudication activities for IDWR Administrative Basins 15 and 17 are scheduled for 2031 – 2034.

In other action, the Board:

- Approved the creation of a new Groundwater-to-Surface Water Conversion Grant Program with a budget of $20 million. The first round of applications will be due on October 2024. More information will be forthcoming on that new grant program.
- Approved 10 flood management grants statewide at a total cost of $702,303.50. The grants were awarded to the Portneuf Soil and Water Conservation District, Clearwater SWCD (two

projects), Madison County, City of Boise, City of Nampa, Flood Control District #17 in Rathdrum, Flood Control District #10 in Garden City (2 projects), and Adams SWCD.

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IDAHO Department of Water Resources

Water Right Administration

- Three areas of separate administration
  - Upper Division
    - Unita Mountains to Pixley Dam
  - Central Division
    - Pixley Dam to Stewart Dam
  - Lower Division
    - Stewart Dam to the Great Salt Lake

Water rights administered by each state and the Bear River Compact