



NEWS RELEASE - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Idaho Water Resource Board receives update on Lemhi Basin Settlement Agreement implementation projects, visits key sites on Lemhi field tour

SALMON – (Sept. 18, 2023) – The Idaho Water Resource Board received updates from staff and feedback from local water users last week in Salmon about the first year of a multi-pronged implementation plan to fulfill the terms of the Lemhi River Basin Comprehensive Settlement Agreement.

In a field trip Thursday afternoon, the Board toured several key locations with water users and staff along the Lemhi River to learn details about new projects coming up.

The voluntary settlement agreement, finalized in February 2022, was negotiated by professional mediators to reduce and resolve long-standing water use conflicts in the Lemhi Basin. Staff officials with the Idaho Department of Water Resources (IDWR) in Salmon reported that multiple aspects of the agreement are moving forward, including:

- Applications for streamflow maintenance rights, known locally as high-flow water rights, are expected to be finalized by IDWR by summer 2024. Local water users said it may be best for the streamflow maintenance rights to be held by the Lemhi Irrigation District as opposed to individual water users. The Lemhi District has filed 210 applications so far. Seven other applications have been filed from outside of the district.
- The Lemhi Settlement Steering Committee, which is overseeing the implementation of the Lemhi settlement agreement, held its first meeting on May 17.
- Investigating the feasibility of increasing aquifer recharge in the upper Lemhi Basin in cooperation with water users and federal, state and local agencies.
- Studying the feasibility of conducting cloud-seeding operations in the Lemhi Basin to boost water supply in partnership with the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), based in Colorado.

Preliminary climactic research by NCAR indicates that storm clouds passing over the Lemhi Basin in the winter are frequent enough and cold enough to allow for cloud seeding activities, officials said, but more research is needed.

“Our research shows there are decent opportunities to conduct cloud-seeding in the storm clouds that pass over the top of the Lemhi and Pahsimeroi Mountains,” said Sarah Tessendorf, project scientist for NCAR. “But we need to do more research and simulations to create a project design and do a cost-benefit analysis to learn the cost of a cloud-seeding program in the area.”

Two key aspects related to the cost of setting up a cloud-seeding program in the Lemhi Basin would involve contracting with specialized aircraft and/or installation and operation of ground generators that land access on private, state or federal lands, she said.

Kurt Bird, a local rancher and water user, said he’s excited about the prospect of a cloud-seeding program in the Lemhi Basin. “If we can get an increase of 5-10 percent in our water supply, that would be very beneficial,” he said. “We’re also in favor of aquifer recharge – anything we can do to increase the water flows in our valley. It’s good to tackle these issues right now and figure them out for the benefit of future generations.”

Water users and IDWR staff reported that plans to implement the first year of a minimum flow of 420 cubic feet per second (cfs) at McFarland Campground – one of the implementation strategies that came out of the Lemhi settlement agreement to scour sediment from spawning gravels to benefit Chinook salmon, steelhead and resident fish – had to be scuttled after one landowner expressed concerns about potential flooding on their property. The Lemhi Settlement Steering Committee will work on developing protocols for resolving those types of concerns in the future, officials said.

In related action, the Board approved three water transactions in the Upper Salmon River Basin:

- **Hat Creek Acquisition** – The Board voted to purchase three water rights on Hat Creek, a Salmon River tributary, from local property owners to benefit Chinook salmon, steelhead and bull trout. The appraised price for the water rights was \$583,278..
- **Knapp Creek 5-year contract renewal** – The Board approved extending the contract to maintain water flows in Knapp Creek, a tributary of Marsh Creek, for the benefit of Chinook salmon, steelhead and bull trout. Funds for this water transaction are provided by the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA).
- **Little Mud Springs 5-year agreement** - The Board approved a 5-year agreement with a Pahsimeroi Valley rancher to increase flows on Little Mud Springs and the Pahsimeroi River to benefit Chinook salmon, steelhead and bull trout. Funds for this water transaction are provided by the BPA.

In other action, the Board:

- Approved a \$250,000 loan to the Blaine County Canal Company to cover costs associated with a project to move its point of diversion, install a new diversion structure, and pipe open canals.
- Approved a \$126,500 loan to the Weiser Irrigation District to raise and resurface the existing Galloway Diversion Dam.
- Granted a time extension for Barber Pool Hydro to exercise its \$850,670 loan already approved by the Board in 2022 to improve and rehabilitate a dam bypass and spillway feature.

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