

# Many reasons to count our blessings in 2023

By Jeff Raybould

Chairman, Idaho Water Resource Board

We have a lot of reasons to be thankful right now if you rely on water for your livelihood, your community or for recreation in Idaho, no matter whether you're a farmer, rancher, water manager, angler, river rafter, power boater and more.

First, we've had a good start to our mountain snowpack this year. It's great to see snowpack values in excess of 140 percent of normal in some Snake River tributary basins that have been in a drought position for several years in a row. I'm talking about the Big Lost Basin, Big and Little Wood Basin and others.

We're just nudging 100 percent of normal snowpack in the Upper Snake right now. We'd like to see that grow to 120% by the end of April to ensure a close-to-normal water supply for the Snake River Basin. Reservoirs were drawn down to near empty levels by last fall, so we really need Mother Nature to keep sending rain and snow our way this winter.

A full water supply in Idaho benefits everyone.

Second, we have been blessed with significant budget surpluses at the state level in recent years. We are humbled by the Idaho Legislature's faith in the Idaho Water Resource Board to allocate major funding to much-needed water sustainability and aging water infrastructure projects statewide.

We appreciate the wisdom of Gov. Brad Little and the Idaho Legislature to allocate significant funds for these water improvement projects. Many of our irrigation systems were built more than 100 years ago; they're in dire need of repair or replacement. The surplus funds create a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address these aging infrastructure issues statewide.

In addition, Gov. Little and the Legislature have placed a priority on some major capital water projects that the Water Board is working on, including a 6-foot raise of Anderson Ranch Dam in the Boise River reservoir system to create additional water storage; a partnership project with Mountain Home Air Force Base to pipe water from the Snake River to the base for a long-term water supply (the base is building the water-treatment plant); and building more recharge basins in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer region for restoring the ESPA to sustainable levels.

We also have a Regional Water Sustainability Projects List that includes more than 20 major projects statewide. The list includes cloud-seeding projects, major canal-lining projects, aquifer-restoration projects and more. That list is dynamic and needs to be inclusive statewide.

On the demand side, population and business growth have emerged as major issues that could affect our water supplies. We now have a total population of approximately 2 million people statewide. We were the first or second-fastest growing state in the nation last year next to Florida. People want a piece of the country in Idaho while they can still get one.

The Idaho Water Resource Board is charged with planning our water future at the statewide level and setting priorities to address our greatest needs. We are heartened to see so many project proposals

coming our way, showing the great demand for water improvements statewide. If you have a project in mind, go to <https://idwr.idaho.gov/iwrb/programs/financial/aging-infrastructure-grant/>

Ultimately, we have to be very prudent with our water resources and use them wisely. Conservation is a cornerstone of our work, but we're also mindful of how water-saving projects can affect ground water resources too. It's a huge balancing act, but with all of the great partners we have involved in water use and management in Idaho, we are dedicated to finding sustainable solutions for the future.

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