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Editorial

Water Management Tools

Times News

In the water business we know only Mother Nature makes water. Since man cannot make new water, we must manage our water supply with the tools available, recognizing that no one tool is the cure or solution to improving Idaho’s supply or addressing shortages.

In 2011, Mother Nature provided us with one of the best water years on record. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation estimated three million acre-feet of water, enough water to fill another American Falls and Palisades Reservoir, flowed past Milner Dam. Storage is a tool.

We forget that five years ago an extended drought created considerable conflict, controversy and conversation on the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA). Water users and legislative leaders pledged to never again get caught short. But economic concerns pushed drought and other water management issues off the radar.

We don’t know when Mother Nature will provide another opportunity like this year; but we do know another drought is out there. Instead of waiting, Idaho needs to start taking advantage of every good water year - not just one of the best on record - to replenish the ESPA.

What Idaho Ground Water Appropriators (IGWA) has learned over the last 20 years is that historically no one activity created the benefits or the problems on the ESPA and no one water management tool will provide the solution. IGWA believes that the steps we have taken so far are bringing us closer to achieving equilibrium, equilibrium meaning that the amount of water going into the aquifer and the amount coming out is in balance.

Recharge occurs naturally and it is also a tool that we can use to achieve equilibrium. The U.S. Geological Survey estimates that 60% of the annual recharge on the ESPA comes from irrigated agriculture; 18% from basin ground water flows; 13% from surface tributaries and canal leakage; and 9% from rain and snow.

In a good water year, we can supplement that recharge using storage water or flood control releases and existing infrastructure. The window of opportunity is narrow, typically 30 to 60 days, in the spring before irrigation starts or the onset of freezing weather in the fall. This timeframe could be broadened by developing separate recharge facilities. Developing any recharge infrastructure requires funding and collaboration between public and private partners.

In 2011, IGWA spent $80,000 partnering with the Idaho Water Resource Board to recharge on the ESPA and $20,000 helping Aberdeen Springfield Canal Company develop a recharge site. IGWA members also collaborate with canal companies and irrigation districts on other projects.

Conservation, used appropriately, is another tool. But the unintended consequences of conservation like converting from flood irrigation to sprinklers, lining canals and ditches, even moving from surface to ground water irrigation, contributed to some of the declines on the ESPA. And then, there is the cost. Lining canals can cost up to $1 million per mile and approach over a billion dollars in larger canals. The result could be further aquifer declines, reduced spring flows, or drying up domestic wells while the benefits would probably accrue to the Snake River and its reservoirs.

IGWA fully supports water management tools that stabilize and improve the ESPA to ensure that Idaho continues to grow and prosper.

Lynn Tominaga

Executive Director

Idaho Ground Water Appropriators, Inc.

IGWA represents over 1 million acres of irrigated ground on the ESPA and its tributaries.