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Idaho

IGWA districts exceed 2016 settlement reductions

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

POCATELLO, Idaho — Idaho groundwater districts participating in a water call settlement with senior surface water irrigators exceeded their water-conservation goal in 2016, according to a new report.

The major concession in the settlement reached in the fall of 2015 with the Surface Water Coalition requires Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer well users to reduce their combined consumption by an annual average of 240,000 acre-feet. According to the coalition's call, well use has led to diminished spring flows into the Upper Snake River, at the expense of surface irrigators.

The eight participating groundwater districts — Aberdeen-American Falls, Bingham, Bonneville-Jefferson, Carey Valley, Jefferson-Clark, Fremont-Madison, Magic Valley and North Snake — collectively beat their goal by nearly 35,000 acre-feet. Water



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Flood releases from American Falls Reservoir, in excess of what Idaho Power can use for producing electricity, roar through a natural spillway that was part of the American Falls before the reservoir's construction. High flows following a wet winter have provided recharge opportunities that should help groundwater users mitigate for a settlement agreement with the Surface Water Coalition.

conservation was achieved either by directly reducing well irrigation or through managed recharge, which involves intentionally injecting surface water into the aquifer to offset impacts of well irrigation.

The performance report must be submitted annually by April 1 to a steering committee comprised of the chair-

man of each groundwater district and a representative from each Surface Water Coalition member. The Idaho Department of Water Resources is also reviewing the report for accuracy and will provide its analysis to the steering committee by July 1.

"It was a pretty difficult start for them last year to get it

all organized, but I think they showed a lot of good effort and pretty much did what they said they'd do, and some of them even more," said Brian Olmstead, general manager of the coalition member Twin Falls Canal Co.

Olmstead noted the settlement calls for milestones to be met toward reversing decades of aquifer declines, as recorded by 19 "sentinel" wells. He's encouraged that an IDWR program is on pace to exceed its own 250,000 acre-foot recharge goal. A wet winter should also help the aquifer with incidental recharge, he said.

The report shows Fremont-Madison Irrigation District/Madison Ground Water District beat its individual goal by the widest margin — more than 24,000 acre-feet. However, the Bonneville-Jefferson and Magic Valley groundwater districts fell well short of their individual goals.

T.J. Budge, an attorney with Idaho Ground Water Appropriators Inc., explained the settlement is based on an av-

erage of years, so districts and individual water users that fell short of their 2016 goals will be expected to reduce more in the future.

Budge said many growers had to make "real sacrifices," such as drying land at a time of low commodity prices.

"It's a learning process, and the pumpers will continue to learn as they go and find out the most effective ways to reduce their water use," Budge said.

IGWA Executive Director Lynn Tominaga believes the lessons of the settlement's first year are that reducing well use is more challenging than many envisioned, and more infrastructure is needed to recharge flood waters during wet springs — both to serve the state's program and private recharge efforts.

"Learning to manage water to meet the settlement agreement is different for each individual farmer, and we're finding that out," Tominaga said. "There isn't any set system that applies to everybody."

Map will project farm ground loss in Idaho's Treasure Valley

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Researchers are developing a map that will project how much farmland will be lost in the Treasure Valley through the end of the century and where it will occur.

The map will project farm ground loss in southwestern Idaho in 10-year increments beginning in 2021, said Jodi Brandt, an assistant professor in Boise State University's Human-Environment Systems Department. She is part of a team of professors and students developing the map.

She will use data on growth patterns and development that have occurred in the Treasure Valley area from 2001 to 2011 to project future farm ground loss.

The project sounds interesting and could be useful to the local agricultural community, said George Crookham, chairman of the Coalition for Agriculture's Future, which formed in 2008 as a result of the rapid development that is occurring in the area.

"I think it could be very beneficial," he said. "I'm curious, and possibly horrified, at what her projections will show."

According to the Ada Soil and Water Conservation District, there were 244,218 acres of farmland in Ada County in 1974 but that total dropped to 144,094 in 2012.

Total farmland in adjacent Canyon County is holding steady at about 206,000 acres but some people fear the rapid development will eventually cause farm ground to disappear in that county as well.

Crookham said Brandt couldn't have picked a better range than 2001 to 2011 to demonstrate the effects of what he called "un-smart growth," which led to subdivisions plopped in the middle of farmland.

"That was the un-smartest growth we have ever experienced," he said.

He said CAF supports smart growth, from the cities out.

Brandt said the project came about as a result of recent BSU surveys that show people in the region "overwhelmingly value agricultural land. It came up that agriculture is something people really care about."

She said the cropland loss map will be completed in about a month. Over this summer, it will be expanded to show how specific crops will be impacted by the projected loss of farmland.

For example, "It will show that we'll lose so many bushels of corn production or so many tons of alfalfa production," she said.

For that product, researchers will incorporate USDA data that show what types of crops are being grown and where.

The Treasure Valley is a major seed-producing region.

Crookham, CEO of Crookham Seed Co., said some seed production in the region has moved to other areas because many vegetable seeds need minimum buffer zones to guard against cross-pollination, and that's been a challenge because of rapid development.

Award recognizes potato truck's NYC float

Capital Press

EAGLE, Idaho — A judging panel of journalists has given the Idaho Potato Commission an award for its August 2016 publicity stunt in which its Great Big Idaho Potato Truck floated the Hudson River around New York City.

The 6-ton replica potato, displayed on a flatbed truck, floated on a barge past national icons including the Statue of Liberty, Brooklyn Bridge and the Freedom Tower.

IPC beat out more than 200 submissions to win the Bulldog Reporter's Silver Award for Best Special Event. IPC President and CEO Frank Muir said the event generated more than 100 million media impressions — which reflect the collective audiences of outlets that carried the story, according to a press release. IPC supports local charities at many of the stops on the truck's national tours.

The truck is now on its sixth tour, which may follow at www.bigidahopotato.com.



Courtesy photo

The Big Idaho Potato Truck visits New York City Aug. 24.

Statewide poll shows significant support for farmland preservation across Idaho

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — A statewide poll found broad support for farmland preservation and that respondents were willing to put their money behind the effort.

A previous poll by Boise State University's School of Public Policy found that residents of the Treasure Valley area considered agriculture to be the region's most important economic sector.

Those results came as a surprise to many people because the Treasure Valley is the state's main urban area and center of Idaho's high-tech industry. Respondents, even those in Boise, favored preserving farmland over creating more affordable housing when asked to choose between the two.

BSU's more recent poll found high support for farmland preservation efforts across the state, which is not a shock given Idaho's rural, agricultural flavor.

What was surprising was that support was equally high regardless of age, gender, political party or geographic location, said Corey Cook, the public policy school's dean, who oversaw the poll.

"What surprised me is how widespread the support is, how it doesn't seem to break along any of the traditional lines," Cook said. "What it suggests to me is that this isn't a liberal-conservative or left-right issue or even a geographical issue. It really is a state-level concern."

Around the nation, when it



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

A field near Nampa, Idaho, is planted to seed peas on March 28. A Boise State University poll found that residents across the state support farmland preservation efforts by wide margins.

comes to other issues such as education or the environment, there are wide differences in margins of support along gender, age, political affiliation and geographical location, he said.

"But around the issue of agriculture and farmland preservation in Idaho, there is widespread agreement," he said. "That to me is a really interesting story that is unique. It is very surprising."

The poll was based on responses from 1,000 adults in all parts of Idaho.

People were asked to rate how concerned they are about farmland being developed into housing on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being extremely concerned and 1 not at all concerned.

Thirty percent of respondents voted 10, 35 percent voted 4-7 and 9.4 percent voted 1-3.

When it came to saving farmland for food production, 47 percent voted 10 and 72.2 percent voted 8-10.

"Those are huge numbers," Cook said.

A total of 67 percent of respondents said they favor state government funding a farmland preservation program in Idaho.

And 62 percent said they would be willing to spend their own money to support farmland preservation efforts.

"That's typically where we see issues like this fall apart," Cook said. "That suggests real support."

Glen Edwards, who farms near Meridian, Idaho, and supports farmland Preservation efforts as a member of the Ada Soil and Water Conservation District, said the poll results are encouraging but he would like to see that support turn into a viable farm ground preservation program.

"People always say they are in support of it but nobody is doing anything to make it happen," he said. "If a developer came by right now and offered me a big chunk of money. ... I might just take it."

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