Record year for state's aquifer recharge

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

JEROME, Idaho — A bountiful water year boosted efforts by the Idaho Water Resource Board and local partners to return water to the Eastern Snake River Plain Aquifer, far exceeding the goal of recharging 250,000 acre-feet a year.

From late October until the end of April, nearly 300,000 acre-feet of water was returned to the aquifer through five projects in eastern Idaho and five projects in south-central Idaho.

An acre-foot equals about 326,000 gallons, or the amount of water that would cover a football field one foot deep.

"It's been a very good year," Wesley Hipke, IWRB recharge program manager, said during the IWRB joint committee meeting on May 2.

Total recharge through IWRB-managed projects this year is expected to end up at more than 340,000 acre-feet for a potential conveyance cost of $2.7 million. The previous recharge record was 166,000 acre-feet in 2011-2012.

John O'Connell/Capital Press File

Wes Hipke, recharge coordinator for the Idaho Water Resource Board. Aquifer recharge in the state will set a record this year, topping 340,000 acre-feet.

Abundant water extended the normal recharge period from 30 to 61 days in the upper valley and from 150 to 172 days in lower valley through April, and it's still running, Hipke said.

"It's not uncommon to have excess water in the river until the middle of June. It depends on how quick it goes out of the mountains," he said.

The year started with 500 to 600 cubic feet per second of water available for recharge going past Milner dam, he said.

"After mid-February, things really started changing. Snowpack got really heavy, and the Bureau of Reclamation started releasing water," he said.

Maximum flows past Milner hit 21,300 cfs in mid-April, he said.

"It's been huge," he said.

It's also been a great teaching year for issues that can arise during an abnormally high water year, he said.

Two of those involved when to turn on the IWRB's recharge water right above Minidoka Dam and when to turn off managed recharge in canals.

Flows at Minidoka have to be 2,700 cfs for IWRB's right to turn on, which wasn't a problem with all the flooding this year. But that right is junior to storage rights at American Falls Reservoir. Water was released from the reservoir at the end of February. But, technically, the American Falls storage right hadn't filled and IWRB's right wasn't turned on to utilize the water spilling past American Falls.

"It is going to be helpful to document the process to turn on that recharge right in circumstances such as this year," Hipke said.

There's also a need to set procedure for turning off managed recharge in canals. In a normal year, most irrigation districts turn water into canals by April 20 and IWRB stops its recharge efforts in canals. But this year was cold and wet and no one was calling for irrigation water that early, so the line was blurred whether IWRB could extend its use of canals for recharge.

"It's important to define when things come off and go on so everyone knows what to expect," he said.

Another issue this year was the Bureau of Reclamation's winter savings agreements that went into effect with the building of Palisades Reservoir. Irrigators agreed to divert no water for 150 days over the winter to build storage in the reservoir.

The bureau suspended that agreement this year, and irrigation districts were able to divert water for recharge. But the bureau needs to put a permanent procedure in place to address similar situations, he said.

Distribution of available IWRB recharge water to recharge partners wasn't an issue this year. However, as IWRB develops recharge capacity, with partners investing in those projects and getting paid to convey IWBR water, it could be an issue in a limited water year, he said.

Competition for recharge water and recharge sites, particularly from groundwater users seeking to mitigate agreed-upon reductions in groundwater use through recharge, is also becoming an issue, he said.

"As water becomes more important and every acre-foot of recharge counts, it's important to set procedures in place to deal with these issues," he said.

Courtesy of Erik Wenninger

A sticky trap captures insects as part of Idaho's potato psyllid monitoring program. Psyllids in Texas with resistance to neonicotinoid insecticides have some Northwest entomologists concerned.

Researchers concerned about resistant Texas psyllids

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

Entomologists say Northwest spud growers should be mindful of recent research showing potato psyllids in Texas have developed resistance to neonicotinoid insecticides.

"It's an extremely important finding," said Oregon State University Extension entomology specialist Silvia Rondon. "This should be a wakeup call for growers in the PNW regarding the potential for psyllids here to develop resistance to pesticides."

Potato psyllids can harbor the Liberibacter bacterium, which causes a crop disease called zebra chip that results in tuber-flesh patterns that darken when fried. The disease first surfaced in the Northwest in 2011.

The recent study, by Texas A&M AgriLife Research entomologist Ada Szczepaniec, still awaits publication. Szczepaniec collected hundreds of pysllids, starting in 2015, from large potato fields in the Rio Grande Valley, Weslaco and near San Antonio. She bred the psyllids and tested progeny for heritable resistance.

Szczepaniec found between 60 and 95 percent of the tiny, winged insects she bred survived treatments with four different doses of imidacloprid and thiamethoxam.

Neonicotinoid use in Texas and Mexico has been on the rise since psyllids were identified as vectors of zebra chip in 2005. Szczpaniec said growers still have other effective chemistries to control psyllids. Northwest growers face considerably less psyllid pressure than Texas growers, she said.

Szczepaniec wasn't surprised by her findings. John Trumble, an entomology professor at the University of California-Riverside, confirmed psyllids with resistance to imidacloprids from Weslaco in a 2013 paper. But Szczepaniec's new research shows thiamethoxam resistance has also developed, and resistance is statewide.

Trumble has encouraged California growers to apply neonicotinoids to potatoes only through a drip line to improve efficacy and prolong the onset of resistance.

"I would be extremely cautious about any foliar applications," Trumble said.

McCain's $200M expansion to boost demand for potatoes

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BURLEY, Idaho — Potato farmers say the expansion of the local McCain Foods USA processing plant should significantly increase demand for their crop and boost the area's economy.

McCain officials announced the $200 million investment last week. The expansion should be operational by the late summer of 2018 and will employ 180 new workers.

"From my standpoint, that's as big of a thing as we could have had announced in this area," said Mark Darrington, a McCain grower from Declo. "For this to come right into the heart of our production area, this is a huge win for agriculture and a huge win for the community."

McCain officials said in a press release the expansion is in response to increasing demand for their frozen potato products such as french fries in North America and the world. The announcement also comes amid a season in which a large crop has driven fresh spud prices well below Idaho growers' production costs, leading the state's shippers to drop their prices to increase their market share.

Southern Idaho Economic Development Organization

Canada-based McCain Foods has announced a $200 million expansion of its state-of-the-art, high capacity production facility in Burley, Idaho. The expansion will create 180 jobs and increase demand for Idaho potatoes.

"In 2016, we reviewed all of our North American sites and narrowed the potential for expansion to a handful that could best help us meet the growing demand for McCain products," Jeff DeLapp, McCain's Regional President for North America, said in a press release. "In the end, we chose Burley due to its proximity to quality potatoes, availability of skilled workforce and strong community and state level support."

The Canadian-based company is the world's largest manufacturer of frozen fries and has done business in Burley for two decades.

Officials at the Idaho Department of Commerce have heard rough estimates that the expansion, at full capacity, will require production from an additional 15,000 acres of potatoes. Idaho farmers planted 325,000 potato acres in 2016, according to USDA.