

# Water call settlement yields 50,000-acre feet for recharge

By JOHN O'CONNELL  
Capital Press

BOISE — Participants in a 2015 water call settlement have agreed to give the state 50,000 acre-feet of storage water, facilitating an early start on the Snake River Plain's next round of managed aquifer recharge.

The Surface Water Coalition alleged in the call its members have suffered injury due to declining Snake River spring flows, caused by well irrigation involving junior water rights.

Well users, represented by Idaho Ground Water Appropriators, Inc., must give the coalition 50,000 acre-feet of storage water per year under terms of the settlement, in addition to cutting back on their well irrigation and meeting aquifer recovery milestones.

The state vowed to support the agreement by averaging 250,000 acre-feet per year of recharge, which entails paying fees to canal companies to intentionally inject surface water into the aquifer through



Idaho Department of Water Resources

Aquifer recharge water spills into the Milepost 31 site along the Milner-Gooding Canal. In large part due to an expansion last winter of the recharge site, IDWR expects to have far greater capacity for conducting aquifer recharge this winter.

unlined canals and adjacent spill basins.

With the Upper Snake reservoir system still 80 percent full on Aug. 22, following an abnormally wet winter, it's a near certainty that the Bureau of Reclamation will have to evacuate storage space to accommodate the next winter snowpack, explained IGWA Executive Director Lynn Tominaga. So the parties have

agreed to donate the flat storage obligation for this season to the Idaho Department of Water Resource's recharge program, rather than flushing it to the ocean unused.

"Everybody is going to have enough water, so they're not going to use any of the water we purchased," Tominaga said.

IDWR plans to use spill basins on the Egin Bench and

within the New Sweden and Snake River irrigation district systems to start recharging with the storage in the Upper Valley on Aug. 31, well before the end of the current irrigation season.

IDWR recharge coordinator Wes Hipke expects it will take the state well into December to recharge all of the storage.

In late October, once the irrigation season has concluded, Hipke also plans to commence recharging in the Lower Valley below Minidoka Dam, using a state recharge water right that remains in priority through the winter, until irrigation resumes the following spring.

"It's going to be a good fall recharge season," Hipke said.

In the campaign that ended last spring, Hipke said the state exceeded its goal, recharging a combined 317,000 acre-feet in the Upper and Lower valleys, but allowed more than 3 million acre-feet to flow through the system unused.

But the state will head into

this winter with far greater infrastructural capacity for conducting recharge, Hipke said.

After irrigation ceased last season, the state's Lower Valley recharge capacity was about 250 cubic feet per second, compared to minimum flows of 500 cubic feet per second available for recharge.

Thanks largely to the expansion of the Milepost 31 recharge site, located along the Milner-Gooding Canal, Hipke anticipates having capacity to recharge 800 cubic feet per second this fall, with surplus water expected due to the likely evacuation of reservoir space. During winter, he expects to have capacity to handle at least 500 cubic feet per second, as some systems may be unavailable because of ice.

In the Upper Valley, Hipke said the state plans to start work this fall on expanding its Egin Bench recharge site.

He said additional recharge projects are also in the planning stages in the Upper Valley, where he hopes to double his recharge capacity within the next two years.



File Photo

An appeals court has ruled that wildlife managers must take an entire population of wolves into account when deciding whether they warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act.

## Wolf ruling expected to have impact on endangered species decisions

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

A federal appeals court has ruled Endangered Species Act protections for wolves were unlawfully lifted in the Great Lakes region, potentially complicating delisting the predators elsewhere.

The "distinct population segment" of wolves in the Western Great Lakes region, which centers on Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan, was removed from the federal list of threatened and endangered species in 2011.

With a population of roughly 4,400 in those three states, wolves had more than doubled recovery goals set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Humane Society of the U.S. challenged the delisting decision, arguing the agency couldn't carve out such a regional "distinct population segment" with the goal of stripping its federal protections.

A federal judge overturned the delisting action and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit has now upheld that decision, albeit on somewhat different grounds.

Contrary to U.S. District Judge Beryl Howell's decision, the D.C. Circuit has ruled that protections for "distinct population segments" can be downgraded.

However, the D.C. Circuit has decided the Fish and Wildlife Service unlawfully failed to study the effects this regional delisting would have on the entirety of the U.S. wolf population.

For a protected species, "the Service cannot review a single segment with blinders on, ignoring the continuing status of the species' remnant," the opinion said.

This finding is significant for a proposal in 2013 to remove Endangered Species Act protections for wolves elsewhere in the U.S., which the Fish and Wildlife Service based partly on the delisting of the Great Lakes distinct population segment.

The agency determined that wolves outside the Great Lakes were no longer a valid species, but the D.C. Circuit said this "leftover group" cannot be left as an "orphan to the law."

"Such a statutory dodge is the essence of arbitrary-and-capricious and ill-reasoned agency action," the ruling said.

The D.C. Circuit's decision indicates that federal authorities should try to delist wolves across the U.S. all at once, rather than region-by-region, said Ethan Lane, executive director of the Public Lands Council, which represents public lands cattle grazers.

"What they got their hand slapped for here is trying to do that in a piecemeal fashion," Lane said.

It's clear from the wolf population's spread in the Northwest that the species has recovered, he said.

"You have a growing and thriving population," Lane said. "It is time for that species to be removed from the endangered species list."

Ralph Henry, attorney for the Humane Society of the U.S., said the Fish and Wildlife Service has become too "hyper focused" on certain populations of wolves without looking at the bigger picture.

## Multi-state specialty crop grant program has \$7 million for this year

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

BOISE — USDA's multi-state specialty crop grant program is proving to be popular, and changes to the application reviews could make it even better, say groups that have applied for the money.

The program will provide up to \$7 million during the 2017 application cycle to projects designed to benefit specialty crops, which include fruits, vegetables, tree nuts and nursery and horticulture crops.

It was authorized by the 2014 Farm Bill and is managed by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service.

"It's been incredibly popular," John Hrivnak, a USDA grants management specialist, told the Western Association of State Departments of Agriculture last month.

AMS received 67 applications requesting more than \$43 million during the 2015 application cycle, the first year of the program.

The agency awarded \$2.6 million to four projects in 2016 and this year's round of funding includes money left over from the 2016 cycle.

State departments of agriculture are the only agencies that can apply for the funding, and they are encouraged to partner with universities and specialty crop organizations.

As the name of the program implies, projects must involve more than one state.

Though popular, the program has also received some criticism related to the review process.

California Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary Karen Ross told Hrivnak that USDA should take another look at who is reviewing the grant applications. She said the comments attached to some marketing-related applications that were not selected for funding "showed me it was not anybody with any understanding of marketing."

"I would say that based on the first round of funding, they need to really look at who's reviewing those grants," Ross said.

Members of a newly formed multi-state dry bean research consortium that includes Idaho, Colorado and Wyoming told Capital Press they have a similar concern about the review process.

That group applied for grant funding in 2015 but was not selected.

Mike Moore, manager of the Wyoming Seed Certification Service, said the review comments were harsh and implied that the work the group was proposing to do related to fertility in dry beans had no value.



John O'Connell/Capital Press

An organization of ranchers and conservationists called the Pioneers Alliance is working to protect ranch land in the Pioneer Mountains and the Craters of the Moon area of southcentral Idaho from development.

## Alliance protects rangeland from development

By JOHN O'CONNELL  
Capital Press

HAILEY, Idaho — The new owners of a 10,000-acre ranch in the heart of the Pioneer Mountains place as much importance on protecting sage grouse habitat and a pronghorn antelope migration corridor as they do on raising cattle.

The Nature Conservancy bought the ranch last year, furthering the goals of the Pioneers Alliance. The informal organization of ranchers, local residents and conservationists with the Nature Conservancy, Wood River Land Trust and the Conservation Fund is dedicated to preventing development of the scenic mountain range and the Craters of the Moon region of southcentral Idaho.

The alliance came together in 2007 to fight the proposed Mountain States Transmission Intertie. Ranchers in the path of the proposed power line, who worried about re-

duced property values, found common ground with conservationists, concerned about its impacts on wildlife.

Though the power project is defunct, the group has continued hosting regular meetings, sometimes inviting politicians and agency officials to speak about issues of local importance, such as sage grouse and public lands management.

But the alliance's primary mission has been acquiring conservation easements on ranch land within an ecologically important area where a broad swath of habitat remains intact.

"We look at it as a really long-term risk (of development)," said Dayna Gross, the local Nature Conservancy's senior conservation manager. "There might not be much risk right now, but certainly 20 to 40 years down the road there could be."

Under the Pioneers Alliance banner, partners have acquired conservation ease-

ments for 85,000 acres, Mc-Gross said.

She said the Nature Conservancy is leasing the land it recently purchased to a rancher who agreed to raise cattle using practices intended to protect wildlife, such as avoiding grazing of riparian areas and wildlife-friendly fencing. The rancher plans to buy the property soon, though the development rights will remain protected in perpetuity. Gross said the Nature Conservancy is also working to secure a conservation easement for another 8,000-acre parcel.

Monte McDonnell, who ranches 20 miles west of Arco, is selling conservation easements for 500 acres. In 2012, he sold easements for 4,000 acres and has encouraged neighbors to work with the alliance. McDonnell likes knowing that his land should look no different when his grandkids are ranching it. Though he's prohibited from constructing new roads and

buildings on his land, McDonnell hasn't had to change his ranch management significantly.

Hailey rancher John Peavey sold conservation easements for nearly 25,000 acres, which he continues grazing with 1,000 cows and 3,800 sheep.

"When the opportunity came along to protect that land from subdivisions and Walmarts and parking lots, it was an easy choice," Peavey said. "We liquidated a great deal of debt and did what we really like for the land."

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service provides much of the funding for the alliance's easement purchases through its Agricultural Land Easement Program. An NRCS official said the agency has \$2.7 million allocated toward purchasing Idaho easements in 2017 and is enrolling new applicants. Program participants must follow approved grazing plans.

## Researchers focus on diversity, flexibility for dryland wheat farmers

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS  
Capital Press

A team of Inland Northwest researchers is testing new cropping strategies to help dryland wheat farmers adapt to changing climate conditions.

The four-year project — Inland Pacific Northwest Wheat-based Systems: Landscapes in Transition — is funded with \$3.4 million from USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

It will build on research findings from the previous Regional Approaches to Climate Change project, a seven-year collaborative project involving the University of Idaho, Washington State University, Oregon State University and USDA Agricultural Research Service.

The earlier research identi-

fied a trend toward increased summer fallow in wheat cropping systems in the Columbia Plateau, and even more is expected with changing climate conditions, said Jodi Johnson-Maynard, a University of Idaho soil scientist and team leader for the new research.

The team will look for ways to diversify cropping systems to be more resilient to change in the future, she said.

Those changing conditions have researchers expecting more variability in weather patterns, with warmer, drier summers and perhaps wetter springs, she said.

The research focuses on the challenges to fall moisture in rain-fed cropping systems. Residual moisture in the seed zone is needed to germinate fall-planted seeds, but farmers can't always count on adequate fall rain. The majority of

those fall-seeded winter crops is wheat, and researchers will be looking for new options to give growers diversity, she said.

"We're trying to deal with seasonality of our moisture and harsh conditions in the fall. Anything we can do with our cropping system to try to deal with those variables would be helpful," she said.

One thing the team will be looking at is new winter pea varieties that maximize yield. Peas can be planted a little deeper than wheat and might be a better choice in a dry fall without adequate seed zone moisture to germinate wheat, she said.

Researchers will also look at cover cropping, which has attracted interest from growers. The challenge is the relatively short season before winter hits and before spring crops

have to be planted, which doesn't allow for enough biomass to protect against winter erosion or benefit soils.

The team will be looking at cover crop mixes to maximize biomass going into winter and provide good forage quality for cattle in the spring. Instead of killing the cover crop to plant a spring crop, the crop will be grazed — allowing farmers to make money off the weight gain in cattle rather than planting a spring crop.

"The biomatter on the ground and the roots below the ground would improve soil structure and infiltration rates and add nutrients to the soil. Then they could put in another fall crop after that," she said.

The research is looking at how alternative crops fit into the rotation and how they can improve productivity, she said.