

Aquifer recharge, other efforts paying off

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

The water level in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer increased an astounding 1.7 million acre-feet over last year for the single largest increase in water volume in more than 80 years.

Bountiful winter precipitation during the past two years helped immensely, allowing the Idaho Water Resource Board to optimize its managed recharge program. But the gain is also due to reduced water use by farmers, private recharge efforts, increased tributary flows and natural seepage from winter runoff.

“The stars were lined up,” Vince Alberdi, Idaho Water Resource Board member and former long-time manager of the Twin Falls Canal Company, said.

IWRB was able to recharge 545,000 acre-feet last winter through developed recharge sites, an amount beyond anyone’s expectations,

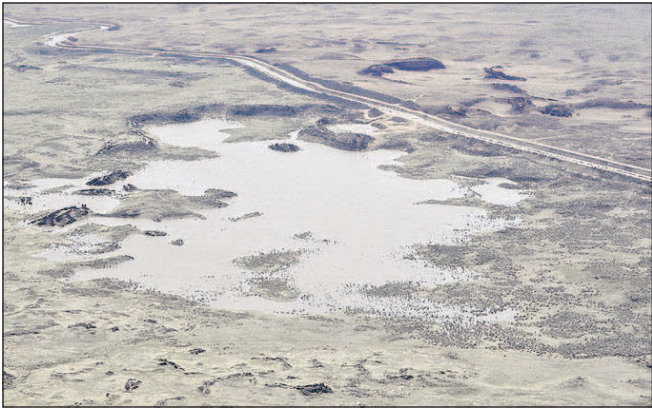


Photo Submitted

Water is recharged into the aquifer at Idaho’s Milepost 31 site. Aquifer recharge and other efforts have resulted in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer increasing by 1.7 million acre-feet during the past year.

he said.

The managed recharge program also sent 317,000 acre-feet seeping into the aquifer the year before, helping to raise overall aquifer levels by 660,000 acre-feet.

“It’s great, it’s wonderful. We have a roadmap for success to continue doing what we’re doing,” he said.

Two good winters, good carryover this year, a commitment by groundwater us-

ers to reduce consumptive use, the board’s efforts to increase recharge capacity and funding by the Legislature all played a part in increasing water levels in the aquifer, he said.

Hopefully, Mother Nature will continue to cooperate, he said, adding that even if she doesn’t the pieces are in place to succeed.

Groundwater users committed to reducing consump-

tive use by 13 percent, about 240,000 acre-feet annually, in a 2015 agreement with surface water users. The board is steadily expanding its recharge program and, hopefully, the Legislature will keep stepping up to fund the program, he said.

“This aquifer will continue to rebound little by little. It’s a win-win deal all the way around,” he said.

It will take an ongoing effort, but it’s a good solution to a problem that would have festered for years — and the result would not have been good. If nothing had been done, the aquifer would have continued to decline, resulting in disaster and curtailments, he said.

IWRB estimates the aquifer was being depleted by 200,000 acre-feet a year between 1952 and 2017. Its goal is to recharge 250,000 acre-feet annually, averaging wet years with dry years, to bring the aquifer to average levels it was at between 1991 and 2001. That will take an

increase of 3 million acre-feet.

Water from the ESPA drives the economy in eastern and south-central Idaho, serving agriculture, industry, manufacturing and municipalities and providing drinking water for more than 40,000 residents.

There’s been a significant uptick in the aquifer level, Mike McVay, an engineer and hydrologist with the Idaho Department of Water Resources, said in a press release.

“But we have to remember that this is a long-term proposition, and this is a good start. We need to build the aquifer back to sustainable levels over time,” he said.

Less than 200,000 acre-feet of recharge will be possible in drought years, so it’s critical to take full advantage of opportunities to compensate for dry years, according to IWRB, which is considering more recharge sites in the region.



ODFW

A federal appeals court heard oral arguments July 11 over whether USDA Wildlife Services is allowed to help state wildlife managers kill a wolf without first studying the environmental impact.

Groups claim USDA must study Oregon wolf killing

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

PORTLAND — Environmentalists hope to convince a federal appeals court that USDA must study the environmental effects of assisting Oregon wildlife regulators with killing wolves.

Last year, a federal judge decided that an agreement by USDA’s Wildlife Services to kill wolves at the direction of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife doesn’t qualify as a “major federal action” warranting analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act.

During oral arguments in Portland on July 11, Cascadia Wildlands and four other environmental groups asked the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to overturn that ruling.

According to legal precedent, NEPA review is required even when the government simply provides grant money for a building project, said John Mellgren, an attorney for the environmental plaintiffs.

“Here, by contrast, there is actual federal action,” Mellgren said, noting that USDA would send out federal employees with federally owned equipment to kill wolves.

Although U.S. District Judge Michael McShane found that the decision to kill wolves rested with ODFW, the state agency can’t force USDA to perform a lethal operation — that’s still at the discretion of federal officials and should be studied under NEPA, he said.

Sean Martin, an attorney for the federal government, countered that NEPA review is only mandatory when a federal agency has control over an activity.

“Here, that kind of supervision is absent,” Martin said. “Those kinds of judgment calls are left to Oregon and Oregon alone. ... It’s the state calling the shots.”

In this case, USDA did conduct a NEPA environmental assessment but the environmental groups claim it was insufficient.

The government argues it only completed the analysis to settle a previous lawsuit and McShane correctly decided the review wasn’t otherwise legally required.

Even if it was required, the USDA properly concluded the assistance of Wildlife Services in killing problem wolves wouldn’t harm the overall population, which is increasing, Martin said.

“Limited control isn’t going to impair that trend,” he said.

The primary limiting factor for wolf survival in Oregon is human acceptance, which necessitates resolving livestock conflicts and managing the species, he said.

However, Mellgren argued that USDA failed to take a “hard look” at the effects of killing wolves as required under NEPA.

The agency should have considered the impacts of wolf killing in Idaho, which is a prime source of wolves migrating into Oregon, he said.

Boise-area irrigation districts deal with trash dumped in canals

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Irrigation system operators in the greater Boise area say their canals are increasingly being used as trash dumps, costing farmers and others money to clear it out.

The Treasure Valley Water Users Association reports that more unwanted — and illegal — materials are being dumped in canals and ditches. Landscape waste, trash, old furniture and appliances, and even car parts have been retrieved from parts of the area’s 1,500-mile system of canals, laterals and ditches.

“It is a serious problem for our irrigation delivery folks every summer, and it has only gotten worse with the strong residential and commercial growth we are experiencing,” association executive director Roger Batt said in a release.

Idaho law prohibits dumping into canals and ditches any material that can interfere with delivering water, he said.

Dumping also appears to be more common since landfills tightened their rules about what can be discarded,



Pioneer Irrigation District

Mark Zirschky, Pioneer Irrigation District water superintendent, clears trash and debris from a weed rack on a small canal in Canyon County, Idaho.

said Mark Zirschky, water superintendent with Pioneer Irrigation District in Caldwell, Idaho.

“We find household trash, grass clippings, tree limbs, tires, batteries and quite a few old televisions,” Zirschky said. “When water was coming in this year, we found a

pile of trash that consisted of TVs, mattresses, coffee tables and a recliner. It would’ve been a real mess had the ditch rider not made an additional trip, ahead of the water being turned on, and cleared it all.”

Building materials also have been found, said Mack Myers, district manager at

Boise-based Settlers Irrigation District. Settlers, which serves many growing residential neighborhoods, is experiencing a growing problem with unlawful dumping in its canals, which can seem like an out-of-sight, out-of-mind place to get rid of litter, he said.

Where homes back up to canals, district employees have seen dirt and rock on the right of way, Myers said in an interview. Some landscapers, in completing finish work before grass is planted or sod installed, toss the unwanted material over the homeowner’s fence, he said. Fall and spring cleanup seasons also can increase debris volume.

Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District, the Treasure Valley’s largest, spends about \$500 per year just hauling off old tires, water superintendent Greg Curtis said. He also sees more televisions, computer monitors and pet waste lately.

As for lawn and garden waste, it can include pesticides the water transports to other users, he said.

In an interview, Curtis said the district sees at least one-third more trash and debris in its systems than it saw 20 years ago.

Batt said trash and debris threaten equipment, plugging pumps connected to pressurized irrigation systems that serve residential areas. Ditch riders are spending more time dealing with trash, he said.

Outlook ‘cautiously optimistic’ for good falling number in wheat

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

People ask Camille Steber if it’s going to be a low falling number year, an indication wheat starch hasn’t been damaged.

“I am cautiously optimistic,” she said.

Falling number is a test that measures wheat quality. Low falling number is caused when the enzyme alpha amylase breaks down starch in the grain. Overseas customers have strict requirements for falling number tests. Farmers receive lower prices for their grain if tests show a falling number below 300.

Steber, research plant molecular geneticist in Pullman, Wash., is testing wheat from Washington State University’s Spillman Farm in Pullman, Wash. for late-maturity alpha amylase, or LMA — a cause of starch damage.

“The only thing consistent about LMA is that it’s consistently inconsistent,” Steber said.

In 2016, low falling number test results hit a large portion of the Pacific Northwest’s wheat crop, costing growers between \$30 million and \$130 million in discounts.

LMA, an enzyme, is the result of extreme temperature fluctuations during

grain filling. It is one of two causes for sprout damage to occur in wheat, and shows up in falling number tests at grain elevators. The other is pre-harvest sprouting caused by rain.

“This LMA thing kind of snuck up on us,” Steber said. “We weren’t looking for it until farmers started to come to me and saying, ‘Hey, I had no rain. ... Tell me why I had low falling number.’”

Wheat development this year slowed due to cold weather after pollen shedding, Steber said. She hopes things slowed enough to avoid the severity the industry saw in 2016.

“Temperature fluctuations weren’t as big,” she said. “In 2016, one day we were in the 90s, the next day we were in the 70s and the following day we had a high in the 50s. We just had a ridiculous temperature crash that year.”

This year, temperatures hovered from the 60s to the 80s and never quite hit the 90s, Steber said. Spring wheat is currently in the period of susceptibility, but forecasts indicate temperatures will remain consistently high, Steber said.

Variety trials have begun harvesting in the center of the state. She expects to receive samples she can run through the falling number testing process.

New U.S. Wheat chairman: Trump thinking about farmers’ best interests

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

The new chairman of U.S. Wheat Associates says he believes President Donald Trump is thinking about wheat farmers.

“Somebody’s got Trump’s ear, because some of the things that have been brought up in our meetings, I’ve heard him repeat,” said Chris Kolstad, who farms near Ledger, Mont.

Trump recently mentioned during a rally that U.S. wheat that crosses the border into Canada is classified as feed wheat.

“He didn’t understand exactly what it meant, but he did know it was not good for U.S. farmers,” Kolstad said. “I think he’s got our best interests in mind. We’re probably just not as patient as he is because our livelihood depends on this.”

Kolstad, 65, raises winter wheat, spring wheat, durum wheat, malt barley, chickpeas, yellow peas, lentils and industrial hemp.

Kolstad took over as chairman from Ritzville, Wash., farmer Mike Miller during U.S. Wheat’s summer board meeting in Seattle. The organization is the overseas marketing arm of the industry.

Last year was a “transition year” for U.S. Wheat, as Vince Peterson took over as president from Alan Tracy.



U.S. Wheat Associates

The U.S. Wheat Associates board of directors seated new officers at their June 24 meeting in Seattle. Left to right: Vice Chairman Doug Goyings of Paulding, Ohio; Chairman Chris Kolstad of Ledger, Mont.; Past Chairman Mike Miller of Ritzville, Wash.; and Secretary-Treasurer Darren Padgett of Grass Valley, Ore. USW officers serve one-year terms and are elected at the winter board meeting.

Mark Fowler replaced Peterson as vice president of overseas operations.

This year, Kolstad said, U.S. Wheat will focus on global trading, developing foreign markets and working on international treaties, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the North American Free Trade Agreement or bilateral treaties with countries such as Japan, Kolstad said.

U.S. Wheat would like to get back in the TPP, which proceeded without the U.S. after Trump withdrew from the trade deal in 2017. Kolstad said the decision has to come from the Trump administration.

“Hopefully we can persuade (U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny) Perdue to

get our message across,” he said.

Kolstad said the wheat industry’s biggest need is increased funding for the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service’s Market Access Program and Foreign Market Development programs.

As Trump’s tariffs go into effect against China and other countries, the extra money will be needed to reach customers overseas, he said.

U.S. Wheat is working on farmers’ behalf, he said.

“We appreciate the check-off dollars we receive from the approximately 140,000 wheat farmers across the nation,” he said. “Their dollars keep us going, and hopefully we can keep them going and increase markets around the world.”