

The Water Reality Idaho Can No Longer Ignore

By Dan Davidson

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I've spent the majority of my career managing water on the Snake River in Idaho, and I can tell you plainly: this year is different.

According to the most recent calculations by the Idaho Department of Water Resources, the amount of water needed across southern Idaho to feed crops this past spring ran at nearly 140% of the historical average. This is the highest number we've ever had on record. On top of the increase in agricultural demand, the reservoirs we count on to carry us through the summer sit far below where they need to be, and our backup storage water is now also running low.

The issue is clear: Idaho does not have enough water.

This isn't a hypothetical problem we can push off to next year or the next decade. The lack of water is affecting Idaho farmers' fields right now, forcing them to choose which crops to water to make it to harvest, and which fields need to be cleared now or even abandoned.

We must address the underlying issues regarding Idaho's water levels and how it is managed now, or this difficult, low-water year will become the norm we have to live with going forward.

I serve as general manager of the Minidoka Irrigation District and have worked alongside my fellow irrigators and farmers of the Surface Water Coalition for years. Our members deliver water to roughly 550,000 acres of Idaho farmland, and this season, nearly all of them have been forced into significant reductions. My own users are dealing with a 15% reduction; others are grappling with as high as 33% less water every day.

This reality is not because of a single dry winter. It's the combination of a historically low snowpack, a statewide drought emergency, and something fewer people may even know about but that matters enormously: declining natural flows along the Snake River. Those flows are the water the river gains naturally as it flows downstream, fed in large part by the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA). This spring, precipitation across our watershed fell to a fraction of normal, even as temperatures ran consistently above average. Storage is now being drawn at an alarming rate. Many surface water entities will exhaust their entire storage supply before the end of the season, forcing curtailment of their users who have senior water rights.

Here's what I want Idahoans to understand, because it doesn't get said enough: surface water users are absorbing a disproportionate share of this shortage. State regulators now calculate the SWC members' predicted in-season shortfall at roughly 741,000 acre-feet. That is the same amount of water as roughly 366,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools. Unfortunately, the mitigation water junior groundwater users can provide toward that shortfall this year comes to only around 80,000 acre-feet. That gap between what's constitutionally owed and what mitigation water is actually delivered means surface water users are being hit twice. Surface water users are absorbing deeper cuts because mitigation alone can't come

close to closing the difference. I want to be clear that SWC is not blaming groundwater users for this. We just want to be honest about how today's balance isn't sustainable for anyone, surface or groundwater, for the long run.

The emergency measures keeping us afloat this year, like curtailing junior groundwater rights, might offset a portion of the gap, but let's not mistake short-term triage for a long-term strategy. Curtailment doesn't restore the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer, which remains at historic lows. It doesn't rebuild storage or increase the spring flow into the Snake River. And with forecasters now pointing to a strengthening El Niño pattern this winter, which could mean even drier and warmer conditions, we may not be able to count on next winter's snowpack to bail us out either. We have to plan as if this water shortfall will continue and not just hope it disappears.

This current situation is here in part because of a long-term decline in the ESPA, a decline that a handful of good water years temporarily masked but never reversed. Recovery, if we're serious about it, will take years too. It will take years to collect the data, years more to develop and implement a plan, and even more years before we see real results.

That means the work has to start now. We cannot put this off any longer.

My fellow SWC members and I truly appreciate that the Idaho Legislature approved \$30 million in annual funding for statewide water infrastructure projects in 2025. It's a meaningful step in the right direction, and it needs to continue. But funding alone isn't a plan, and infrastructure alone won't recover an aquifer that's been declining for decades.

We don't have to guess what happens when a region puts off hard decisions year after year. The Colorado River is a sobering example of what happens when declining storage becomes accepted as the new normal. Idaho still has an opportunity to make a choice that other states didn't make in time. We must capitalize on it.

This year's record water demand, drought conditions, and depleted water availability are red flag warnings. Idaho can keep reacting to each irrigation season as it arrives, or we can start building the kind of enforceable, long-term groundwater management plan that actually restores the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer, not just stabilizes it at today's deficient levels.

The time to prepare for 2027, and the many decades after it, is now.