

**Mountain Home Aquifer Working Group
of the
Expanded Natural Resources Legislative Interim Committee
Mountain Home City Hall Meeting Room
160 South 3rd East
Mountain Home, Idaho 83647
July 16, 2004**

Attendees: Chairman: Representative Bert Stevenson
Committee members: Representative Doug Jones and Representative Peter Nielsen,
Senator Tom Gannon
Members of the public: Sign-up sheet available from Legislative Services Offices

Presenters: Lynn Tominaga, Executive Director, Idaho Ground Water Appropriators, Inc. (IGWA)
Bert Bowler, Native Fisheries Director, Idaho Rivers United (IRU)
Ann DeBolt, Botanist, USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station
Jim Blanksma, Mountain Home Ground Water Advisory Group

Chairman Bert Stevenson called to order the meeting of the Mountain Home Aquifer Working Group at 9:35 a.m. on Friday, July 16, 2004, in the Mountain Home City Hall Meeting Room. The first order of business was to approve the minutes of the previous meeting. Senator Gannon moved to approve the minutes of June 15, 2004. Representative Jones seconded the motion. The minutes were unanimously approved.

The working group continues to look for opportunities and projects to restore or manage the Mountain Home aquifer system. At this meeting, three presentations offered three different options, each of which has potential for being part of the larger solution:

1. Agricultural set-aside programs;
2. Low impact landscaping for domestic and municipal water users; and
3. Options for local water projects.

It was generally agreed that no one sector of the community could resolve this issue and that a broader-based approach is needed, one that “equitably funds” measures that will benefit the entire community. Funding mechanisms were briefly discussed.

Agricultural Set-aside Programs. Lynn Tominaga, IGWA’s executive director, reported on two set-aside programs that may have potential for stabilizing the aquifer as well as providing benefits to water quantity, water quality and other environmental concerns. These programs are restricted to agriculture. Two handouts were provided: “CREP State Updates” and “EQIP Ground and Surface Water Conservation (GSWC) Program.

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a cooperative partnership between local, state and federal entities. Landowners receive cash payments to set-aside ground for 10 years. Water rights from the set-aside ground would be used for long-term mitigation. The water could not be sold or used for other purposes. Before developing a CREP in Idaho, a number of issues need to be addressed, including how water rights would be treated after 10 years, whether the payment would be based on an irrigation rate or dry land rate, soil type restrictions and the highly erodible index, the state of Idaho’s contribution, and who

the local partners would be.

USDA TOUR. State and federal officials will tour the Magic Valley on August 17, 18 and 19th to explore the potential for developing a CREP in Idaho. A public hearing will be held from 4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. on August 18, 2004, at the 8th Street Center in Buhl. U.S. Senator Crapo and U.S. Representative Simpson are scheduled to attend. Representatives from Mountain Home are encouraged to attend.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is also a set-aside program. An EQIP program currently underway in Utah is paying landowners to shut off wells for drought mitigation. This three-year program could serve as a model for a similar program in Idaho and be a short-term measure while CREP is developed. It will take about 18 months to two years to establish an Idaho CREP.

Low Impact Landscaping. Bert Bowler, IRU, and Ann DeBolt, USFS, gave a slide presentation on low impact landscaping and xeriscaping for domestic and municipal water users. Landscaping with native plants conserves water and attracts wildlife. DeBolt works with federal agencies and producers to increase the availability of native plants for range land restitution, conservation and habitat restoration. Mountain Home's proposed library expansion was suggested as a potential demonstration site. Two handouts were provided: a RiverSmart brochure, "Top 10 RiverSmart Tips" and "Landscaping with Native Plants of the Intermountain Region," December 2003, Technical Reference 1730-3.

Proposed Bennett Creek Project. Jim Blanksma, representing irrigation interests from the Mountain Home Advisory Group, presented a proposal to transfer water from Bennett Creek Reservoir to Mountain Home Reservoir. His presentation included several U.S. Geological Survey topographical maps. Before undertaking such a proposal, many issues would need to be addressed, including but not limited to, economic feasibility, reliability of the water source, construction costs, elevation, rights of way, pumping and friction losses. The proposal led to a discussion of other potential projects like increasing storage in Little Camas to Long Tom, addressing reach losses between them, increasing tunnel capacity, sealing or lining canals, piping water from one area to another or across problem areas, and the trade-off between lining canals to conserve water and recharge to the aquifer.

Funding Mechanisms. Innovative solutions are required. Agriculture alone cannot finance the improvements, especially when the accrued benefits are community-wide. Community members called for a broader-based approach and suggested that the legislature create some sort of funding mechanism to "equitably fund" measures like buying farmland, lining canals, and/or moving water from one drainage to another. Another funding option might be a revolving loan pool to establish a block of money to use for projects, either through the Idaho Department of Water Resources (IDWR) or some parallel structure that could access state bonding authority and better interest rates.

The working group asked Gary Spackman, IDWR, to research Idaho statutes to identify organizations, structures and limitations related to the implementation of such a funding mechanism. Spackman was also asked if IDWR staff could provide a general cost overview for the Bennett Creek proposal.

There will be no meeting in August. The next meeting is scheduled for September 14, 2004, at 9:30 a.m. in the Mountain Home City Hall Meeting Room.

There being no further business before the working group, Senator Gannon moved to adjourn the meeting. Representative Jones seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at 11:30 a.m.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Copies of the maps, studies and handouts are available to the public on the IDWR website at www.idwr.state.id.us/Committee

Meeting notices, agendas and minutes are available to the public at <http://www2.state.id.us/legislat/legislat.html>.

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