



A coyote roams in a former crop field in Minidoka County that's been converted to native range under Idaho's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. (photo courtesy Rob Sharpnack/SWC)

ENROLLMENT DIPS IN IDAHO CREP PROGRAM; STILL KEY SOLUTION TO REDUCE AQUIFER DECLINE

By Steve Stuebner

Water savings through reduced groundwater pumping in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA) region are needed more than ever in this rapidly growing area with some of the most productive farmland in the state.

The latest findings on water volume showed the Lake Erie-sized groundwater aquifer has dropped to approximately 4.25 million acre-feet of water, compared to a temporary high of 7.1 million acre-feet of water in 2020, according to the Idaho Department of Water Resources. The current volume in the ESPA is the

second lowest level since the historic low in the drought year of 2016.

Idaho's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), first started in fiscal 2006, is specifically designed to reduce groundwater withdrawals from the ESPA. It's one of many initiatives currently underway to reduce pumping and restore the aquifer to a sustainable level. Estimates indicate the ESPA is over-drafted by 200,000 acre-feet per year.

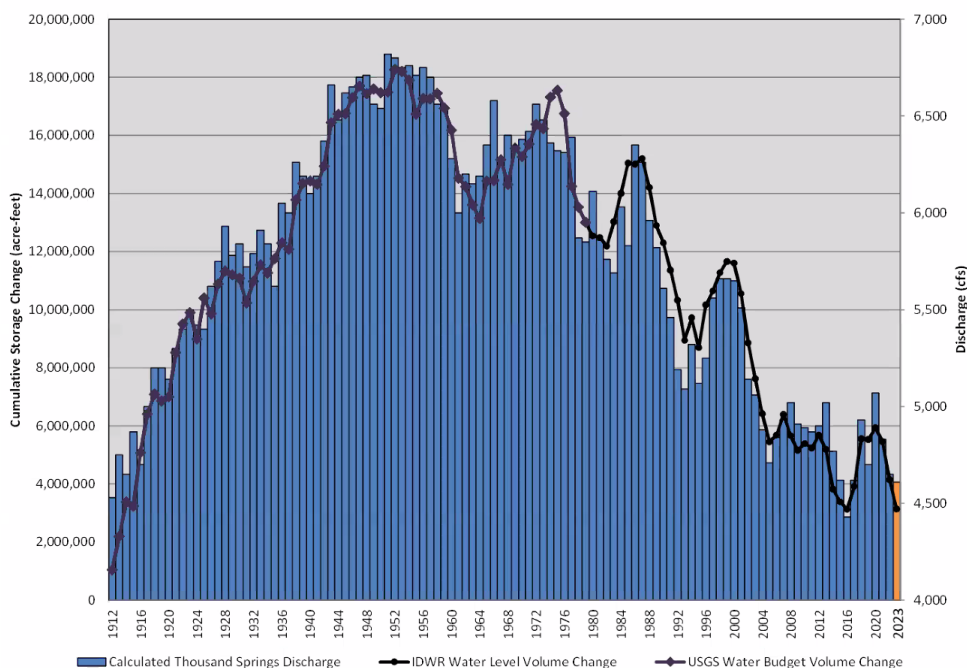
CREP is a partnership program between the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the State of Idaho that provides incentive payments to

farmers to idle marginal farmland and conserve groundwater. In Idaho, the State of Idaho works with the Idaho Department of Water Resources, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, local irrigation districts and conservation districts in a partnership.

The FSA provides participants with rental payments and cost-share assistance as well as being in charge of advertising and marketing the program. The Conservation Commission manages the program, working directly with conservation districts and producers.

If producers enroll in CREP, they must

ESPA Change in Volume of Water and Thousand Springs Discharge



Bell-curve of ESPA water volume tracks water use over time since 1912. Canal seepage added water volume to the aquifer through the 1950s, and then the onset of ground water pumping for irrigation and drinking water have reduced aquifer levels to current levels. (Source: IDWR)

voluntarily idle farmland and stop irrigation use. They're required to plant native grasses and plants in the place of a crop.

Unfortunately, CREP enrollment has dropped in recent times since producer contracts had to be renewed in 2021, officials said. At its peak, nearly 20,000 acres of farmland were enrolled in CREP, leading to water

savings of about 40,000 acre-feet per year.

Currently, CREP has about 10,225 acres enrolled in the program for a net water savings of 20,450 acre-feet. One acre-foot is the amount of water it takes to flood one acre of land to the depth of one foot.

"A lot of producers felt that 15 years was a long time for their land to be

under a CREP contract," said Rob Sharpnack, CREP Program Manager for the Conservation Commission. "Some people felt that with current high commodity prices, they should be working the land again."

The FSA listened to comments from producers at the end of the first contract period and reduced the contract period from 15 years to 10 years, Sharpnack noted.

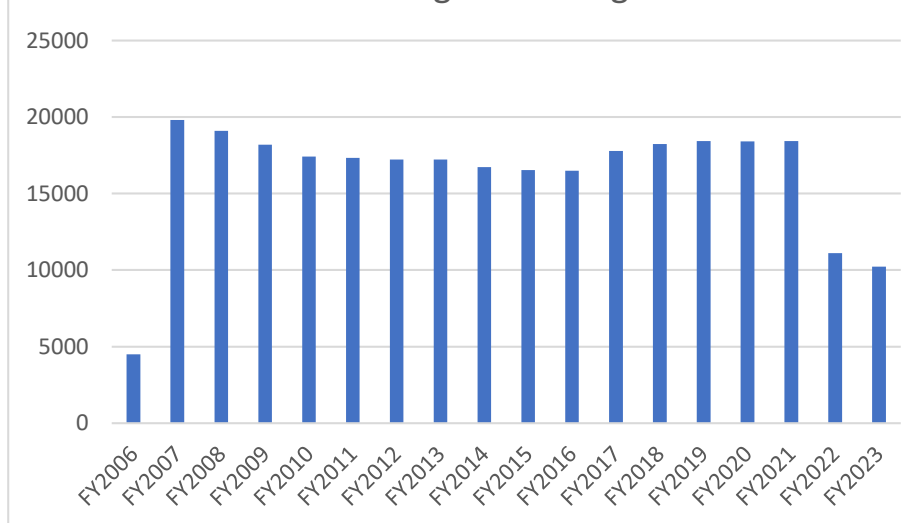
"We haven't had everyone re-enroll in the program," he said. "We lost some big contracts, and we've had a lot of little ones taking their place."

The main issue is that farm commodity prices are more attractive to farmers than what they could receive through FSA payments under the CREP program, officials said. FSA and the State of Idaho have tried to increase financial incentives for farmers in return for idling marginal farmland. But the commodity prices are still more attractive, officials say.

"It is a great program," said Bob Turner, executive director of the Idaho Ground Water Appropriators (IGWA). "They have raised their per-acre prices, but the prices that farmers can get for commodities like corn, potatoes and alfalfa are still more attractive."

IGWA members and groundwater districts across the ESPA are required

CREP Program Acreage



LOW INTEREST LOANS FOR IDAHO SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION

- Sprinkler Irrigation
- No-Till Drills
- Fences
- Livestock Feeding Operations
- Solar Stock Water Pump Systems

3% - 6%
Terms 7-15 Years
Up to \$600,000



swc.idaho.gov

(208) 332-1790



to reduce groundwater use by a total of 240,000 acre-feet of water per year under a 2015 settlement with the Surface Water Coalition, mediated by then-House Speaker Scott Bedke. In drought years, groundwater districts have not been able to meet the annual target. That has put the settlement agreement on shaky ground. A new agreement between SWC and IGWA is expected to be forthcoming.

In the meantime, ESPA water levels could continue to decline without intervention. The Idaho Water Resource Board's ESPA-recharge program – diverting Snake River flows into recharge basins in the winter – has a goal of 250,000 acre-feet of water per year, on average. In good water years, the Board has surpassed that goal. In drought years, it has fallen short.

So, all potential ways to reduce demand on the aquifer will help.

Economic value of the ESPA

The ESPA has tremendous significance to the communities of Southern and Eastern Idaho and the State of Idaho. It is known as a sole-source freshwater aquifer that provides safe drinking water to more than 400,000 residents and 18 cities, irrigation water for more than 1 million acres of farmland, and water for many commercial and industrial businesses – from malt and barley plants to potato processing plants and cheese manufacturing plants.

The ESPA region produces about 21 percent of all goods and services within the State of Idaho—resulting in an estimated annual value of \$10 billion. Water is the critical element that supports everything.

Turner said IGWA members are looking more at “soft” conversions of groundwater-to-surface water use to keep farmland in production vs. cutting back groundwater use.



CREP field in Cassia County. (courtesy Carolyn Firth/SWC)

“That way you can stay in production and keep your crop mix when there is extra surface water available or storage water available for rent,” he said. “That’s the avenue of choice right now.”

FSA officials and the Conservation Commission, meanwhile, will continue to work on increasing enrollment in CREP.

“The conservation districts are aware of the program and support it,” Sharpnack says. “We occasionally will see a referral from one of them. The groundwater districts all are aware of the program and recommend it to their members. During the first contract period, some groundwater districts offered incentives to their members to enroll in CREP. That has been replaced by the State cost-share payments.”

There are more issues than just commodity prices with CREP enrollment, Sharpnack says. “Drought has been a big problem for us, making it difficult for us to establish contracts. Another problem we had was a population explosion of voles. Voles

would destroy some of the native plants, such as the Snake River Wheat Grass, in the CREP fields. Natural controls such as birds of prey, coyotes, foxes, and badgers all helped control the voles and mice while utilizing the CREP fields.”

CREP is a groundwater savings program, he noted. Many landowners who apply cannot demonstrate their groundwater usage on the acres that they hope to enroll for the four of six consecutive years required to enroll in the program, he said. Another issue: producers don’t have a clear water right for the land that they wish to enroll in CREP.

How the CREP program works

Federal and state funds are available to producers if they voluntarily enroll in CREP for 10-year contracts. Participants remove irrigated cropland from agricultural production and convert the land to native grasses, trees or other vegetation. This will reduce irrigation water consumption, improve water quantity and quality in the Snake River and its tributaries, and provide wildlife habitat for terrestrial

and aquatic species.

Land enrolled in the program voluntarily curtails the water right during the contract period in exchange for the annual rental payment and becomes active again after the contract period has ended.

The goal for CREP is to enroll up to 50,000 acres of farmland. Producers located in the following counties can sign up for the program:

Ada, Bannock, Bingham, Blaine, Bonneville, Butte, Camas, Cassia, Clark, Custer, Elmore, Fremont, Gooding, Jefferson, Jerome, Lemhi, Lincoln, Madison, Minidoka, Owyhee and Twin Falls. If 50,000

acres were enrolled, that could lead to the reduction of 100,000 acre-feet of ground water use annually.

The CREP program also has the potential to conserve energy and reduce the amount of agricultural chemical and sediment entering state waters from agricultural lands, FSA officials said. In addition, the program has the potential to improve aquatic and terrestrial wildlife habitat.

To be eligible cropland must be located in the project area, meet cropping history criteria and be physically capable of being planted in the normal manner to an agricultural commodity, meet minimum irrigation requirements and be physically and legally capable of being irrigated in a normal manner when offered for enrollment. Applicants must enter into a water use contract with the State of Idaho.

Participants who enroll their land into the CREP must agree to maintain and



CREP field with thrify range plants in Twin Falls County. (courtesy Rob Sharpnack)

manage the practice according to an approved conservation plan for the duration of the CREP contract length. Maintenance includes managing for noxious weeds, pests, or other species. The participant agrees to not disturb the acreage during the primary nesting season of April 1—August 1 after stand establishment.

How payments work

Under the Idaho Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer CREP, eligible participants may receive the following payments: ,

- An Annual Rental Payment is made by the FSA each October. Rental rates vary by county.
- FSA cost-share payment of up to 50 percent of the eligible cost to install the approved conservation practices on new contracts.
- Idaho provides a 13 percent match of the FSA Annual Rental Payment to landowners.
- On New CREP contracts, Idaho will

cost-share \$10 per acre for seed, one time, for conservation planting.

Minidoka County example

A Minidoka County producer elects to enroll 100 acres of irrigated cropland into a 10-year CREP contract. The federal rental rate for the land is \$328 per acre per year.

The Idaho match payment will be 13% or \$42.64 per acre per year. The landowner's rental rate payment would be \$370.64 per acre (\$328 + 42.64), for a total annual payment of \$37,064 (\$370.64 x 100 acres).

For more information about the CREP program, contact with Rob Sharpnack, CREP Program Manager, 208-944-3783 or rob.sharpnack@swc.idaho.gov.

Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.

COMMISSION

Erik Olson, Chairman
Wendy Pratt, Vice-Chairman
Karen Sharpnack, Secretary
Blake Hollingsworth, Treasurer
Mitchel Silvers, Commissioner
Joan Cloonan, Commissioner
Richard Savage, Commissioner
Delwyne Trefz, Administrator



SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION

322 East Front Street, Suite 560 Boise Idaho
83702
P: 208-332-1790 • ww332-1799
info@swc.idaho.gov • www.swc.idaho.gov

Conservation the Idaho Way: Sowing Seeds of Stewardship