Opinion by Roger Chase, chairman of the Idaho Water Resource Board ~ Feb. 23, 2016

Depleted Idaho aquifers a major concern

BY ROGER CHASE

The Idaho Department of Water Resources and the Idaho Water Resource Board continue to move forward to protect, enhance and stabilize Idaho's water resources. Our water is among our greatest treasure; we must protect both its quality and its quantity for future generations of Idahoans.

With guidance and support from Gov. Butch Otter and the Idaho Legislature, great progress is being made to ensure that we can meet existing and future water needs. These efforts start with every person, home, industry, city, farm or any other water user finding ways to use less. For instance, cities, industries and agriculture could find new ways of reusing water.

One of the Water Resource Board's great concerns is the depletion of Idaho's water resources — particularly our aquifers. Most of our cities, employers, and ag industry stakeholders tap into groundwater aquifers to meet their needs. But many of our aquifers are dropping.

That's why the Water Resource Board has drafted a statewide sustainability policy. The board will conduct public meetings throughout Idaho in the coming year to gather suggestions on incorporating its findings into our Comprehensive State Water Plan. Sustainability of our precious water resources is critical to our future.

Idaho is the No. 3 user of water per capita in the United States, behind Texas and California. The agriculture industry is by far the largest water user in the state. Ag also is Idaho's largest industry, with $7.9 billion in cash receipts in 2015. Idaho's farms and producers not only help feed America, but also the world. The ag industry continues to be more efficient with its water use every year, but like all of us, they must do better.

The Idaho Water Resource Board's top priority is to "stop the drop" in our aquifers and stabilize them. The largest effort toward achieving that goal right

now involves stabilizing the critically overused Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer. First we must increase sustainable spring flows for fish hatcheries in the Hagerman area. This is being done primarily by purchasing some fish hatcheries, recharging the aquifer to increase flows returning to the springs, and replacing some groundwater pumping projects with surface water.

The second part of this effort is a historic agreement between the groundwater users and surface-water users. The groundwater users agreed to reduce their pumping by 240,000 acre-feet of water a year and lease additional water to offset shortfalls that might be caused by drawing too much from the aquifer.

Surface-water users have agreed they will not make “water calls” on the groundwater pumpers if the terms of the agreement are met. If a water call is made, it would force users with newer or “junior” water rights to stop pumping.

The third part of this effort focuses on building and improving aquifer recharge sites to recharge an average of 250,000 acre-feet of water a year. Most of the recharge water is delivered through existing canals to sites known as “spreading basins.” Water for recharge comes primarily from Snake River flows in the fall, winter and during high flows in the spring.

Over time, recharge efforts should stabilize and sustain the aquifer and enable us to meet existing water demands.

The agreements we have reached to stabilize and sustain our water supplies are historic. We recognize that our water resources are finite. We have done many great things with our water, but we must do better. Let us keep it clean, use it wisely, and treasure it forever.