

Idaho governor wants to keep more water from Snake River

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Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter has proposed building more dams and expanding existing ones to keep more water from the Snake River in Idaho and recharge the dwindling Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer.

"Rather than looking at how to divide up scarcity, we ought to be looking at how we can get more to stay here," Otter said Wednesday at the Idaho Water Users Association convention. "The more water that we can keep from getting past that head gate, the more water we can have."

Otter said he had met with Bureau of Reclamation officials about two or three new potential dam sites, which he did not identify. He also did not say which dams might be raised to impound more water.

Bill Sedivy, executive director of Idaho Rivers United, said the state doesn't have the hundreds of millions of dollars that would be needed to raise existing dams or build new ones and federal officials have said they can't help with funding.

"A much more cost-effective action would be to figure out how to use water more wisely and more intelligently, rather than throwing big money at dam projects that don't make sense," Sedivy said. "A way more prudent approach is teaching Idahoans how to use what existing water resources we have more prudently."

He said the state ranks third in the nation in per-capita water use, mostly because of rising consumption in the rapidly growing Treasure Valley.

Idaho farmers have learned to be efficient and residential users need to do the same, Sedivy said.

Tension over rights to water from the aquifer has risen with a case pending before the state Supreme Court, which has been asked to resolve a dispute between canal companies that hold senior rights and groundwater pumpers with junior rights.

A decision could come between now and April, and any ruling could be followed by state legislation that would revise laws on water rights to ease the economic impact.

Repeating a campaign pledge, Otter said he planned to call a water summit to tackle disputes over water rights.

"I will be the champion of the solutions you do come up with as long as they fit the state Constitution," the governor said.

Former association president Harold Mohlman of Rupert praised Otter's approach.

"If you have a governor who's basically saying he's for water, you're going to get something done," Mohlman said. "There are groups of us here, we're fighting right now, the junior and the senior water users, and it's important to have a governor who supports us all."

Last year then-House Speaker Bruce Newcomb, R-Burley, failed to get the Legislature to approve an aquifer recharge plan, but Steve Howser, general manager of the Aberdeen Springfield Canal Co. said Otter might succeed.

"Every time we come up with a plan, the difficulty is funding," Howser said. "The leadership to acquire that funding has to come from the governor's office."

Information from: Idaho Statesman, <http://www.idahostatesman.com>