



Idaho water destined for urban needs

Pipeline proposal shows how growth and economics will draw the precious resource from crops to cities.

By Rocky Barker - rbarker@idahostatesman.com

07/15/07

At the same time water shortages are threatening to dry up hundreds of thousands of acres of Idaho farmland, developers are pondering a 50-mile pipeline to carry water from the Snake River to future subdivisions in the desert south and east of Boise.

The pipeline idea is the latest demonstration of an old Western proverb quoted by the late Marc Reisner in his 1986 classic, "Cadillac Desert": "Water runs uphill toward money."

For years in Idaho that water has run up from aquifers through irrigation pipelines onto crops and into homes, farms, cities and industries. It ran up high plateaus overlooking the Snake River thanks to high-powered pumps and cheap power. But now, nearly all the water is spoken for and — in some cases, under dispute.

That has made the state's fundamental resource more valuable economically, and subject to the free market. Now Idaho's water may run uphill over mountains to the cities where the state's money, power and populations are centered.

"In the Western states we see water moves to the urban areas because they can afford to pay more for water," said Idaho Department of Water Resources Director David Tuthill. "It's healthy."

Water law across the West is built on the doctrine of "first come, first served."

The right to use the water is granted to the people who used it first — mostly farmers. With all of the water already controlled, cities must buy water rights from these senior users, in this case from farmers who divert water from the Snake River upstream.

Idaho law allows for these kinds of water sales and transfers to ensure other users' rights are not reduced and the public interest is considered.

The most publicized water purchase was made in 2005 by the state's Water Board, which bought 74,000 acre-feet from Bell Rapids Irrigation Co. farmers near Buhl.

An acre-foot of water is the amount of water that would flood one acre of land one foot deep. The average household uses an acre-foot of water annually for drinking, washing and watering the lawn.

Tuthill said the pipeline proposal fits into the state's vision for changing water use. Cities such as Los Angeles, Denver and Las Vegas have reached out beyond their watersheds to tap into agricultural water supplies. It was just a matter of time before the idea came to Idaho, Tuthill said.

"This is exactly the kind of thing I expect we'll see in other areas as well," he said.

water for food

Idaho's water shortage right now is relative. Idaho water users withdraw an average of nearly 20 billion gallons a day from surface and groundwater sources.

At that rate, Idaho water users could drain Lucky Peak Reservoir east of Boise in five days. Irrigation accounts for 88 percent of Idaho's water use. So when farmland is dried up, it can serve a lot of other users.

Farmers had leased water for less than \$5 an acre-foot from other farmers until only a few years ago.

The state's entire water system, controlled by farmers, and canal companies and irrigation districts serving farmers, was designed to keep the price of water low.

"It's a statist system," Daniel Hurlbutt said in 2005. Hurlbutt is the judge who presided over the massive review of state water rights from 1987 to 1999. "We have seen with the Soviet Union how well such systems last."

Moving water from an area by drying up land transfers the economic benefits as well. Groundwater users are raising those concerns now just as Buhl residents did when the state bought the Bell Rapids water in 2005.

The price of water

As the state has grown and new developments, like dairies, processing plants and booming residential development have sprung up, the demand for water has overwhelmed these regional concerns.

Here are some recent prices people are paying to get water:

- **Salmon:** The federal government leases water at a rate of \$14 an acre-foot to aid salmon migration.
- **Farmers:** Farmers facing shutoff earlier this month in the Magic Valley won their reprieve by leasing water stored in upstream reservoirs at a price of \$25 an acre-foot.
- **Bell Rapids:** The Water Board paid \$300 an acre-foot to permanently buy the water from the Bell Rapids farmers near Buhl.
- **Pipeline:** The 20 landowners who recently banded together to put up the \$1.5 million to study the pipeline proposal are betting they will be able to sell the water for homes and businesses in the desert south of Boise for far more. Their concept calls for building one or two pipelines, 30 to 50 miles long and 3 to 5 feet in diameter at a cost of \$400 million.

The pipes would carry 60 million to 120 million gallons out of the Snake River each day. As a comparison, United Water pumped 78 million gallons on July 1 to service 83,000 connections — about 250,000 people — in the Boise area.

- An average United Water residential customer who waters his own lawn pays more than \$900 an acre-foot for water — but that includes the cost of treating drinking water. Other residential users in the Valley pay \$300-\$600 annually.
- People who use water from irrigation canals on their lawns pay as little as \$70 annually. That's because they own the right to use the water and pay only the delivery cost.

Slaking a thirst

Most household water comes from aquifers below the Treasure Valley. The groundwater below the desert south of Boise is limited and dropping, prompting the pipeline study.

"That land is not irrigated so it doesn't have a water supply," said Norm Semanko, executive director of the Idaho Water Users Association. "If you are going to develop in the area, you need to have some water supply."

But in parts of the Treasure Valley, including Southeast Boise, groundwater is limited. That's prompted United Water to go to the Boise River for water. It has purchased some water and leases some to augment its groundwater supply.

But irrigation districts and canal companies that control 93 percent of the Boise River water for irrigating crops and lawns hesitate to give any up.

These farmer-controlled institutions created to serve Treasure Valley farms want to keep the water for irrigation. They have encouraged developers and individuals to convert from using expensive, filtered water to using pressurized irrigation systems supplied by canals to water subdivision lawns.

More than 43,000 acres — 8,000 since 1994 — of the 276,000 acres of Treasure Valley cropland have been converted to subdivisions, schools and malls. Water users debate whether this means there is more water available.

United Water, with the support of Idaho Rivers United, encourages its customers to conserve water to keep its costs for obtaining, treating and delivering water down. The canal companies encourage use.

Idaho law says landowners lose the right to use water if they quit using it for five years. But the canal companies still divert the same amount and whatever is left returns to the river at the lower end of the canal. A million acre-feet of water flows out of the Boise River annually.

Semanko and the canal companies believe that new reservoirs or projects that raise the level of current reservoirs will be necessary to meet demand. Conservation groups say water conservation should be enough.

But as long as the population keeps growing, so will the demand for water.

"It's our job to plan for our grandchildren's future to make sure they have the quality of life that we've had," Semanko said.