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Our View: Otter's talk about dams should be tabled

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It's easy to build expectations.

It's costly to build dams.

So let's put Butch Otter's pro-dam comments into practical context. The new governor says he's all for new dams and bigger dams, aimed at keeping more Idaho water in Idaho. But without a serious talk about the price tag — and a careful look at how we're using our water now — Otter's talk is at best premature, at worst a needless distraction.

When Otter addressed the Idaho Water Users Association's annual convention last week, he told his audience what they wanted to hear. "Rather than looking at how to divide up scarcity, we ought to be looking at how we can get more to stay here."

For water users, those comments are as welcome as a full reservoir after the snowmelt. On Tuesday, Otter's own spokesman toned down the talk.

Otter hasn't indicated support for any new dams, or a preference for any site, spokesman Jon Hanian said. The discussion grows out of an ongoing federal Bureau of Reclamation study of increasing storage capacity in the Boise and Payette river basins. The feds have \$140,000 to pay their share of the next phase of the study; Otter supported this funding during his days in Congress. Unless Congress follows up by funding a much more extensive feasibility study of a site, it's hard to guess on the costs of new or expanded dams.

Fair enough.

But there's a danger when a governor — a state's chief elected official, not just one of 435 members of the U.S. House — lends his out-loud voice to speculation that Idaho can dam its way out of water scarcity. A governor's comments, carrying the weight of executive office, can steer the direction of state policy.

Otter's comments seem to imply that the state can best stretch its water supply by expecting some big public or private benefactor to bankroll a dam. The recent history is hardly encouraging. The last major storage dam in Idaho, Dworshak dam near Orofino, was completed in 1972, one year before a young Butch Otter began serving in the Legislature.

The state's demographics also have changed dramatically since 1972. Idaho's population has doubled and grown more urban. Farmers remain the state's biggest water consumer, but an increasing supply of water must go toward residential use. While farmers have done a good job of trying to use water more efficiently, urban water users haven't kept pace, says Bill Sedivy of Idaho Rivers United, a conservation group.

Wittingly or unwittingly, Otter's pro-dam comments distract attention from the need for water conservation. Dams, after all, do not increase rainfall or snowpack. If anything, Sedivy said, the long-term climate trends and forecasts project a continuing decrease in precipitation — weakening the economic case for dams, but underscoring the case for conservation.

New or larger dams could be a part of an Idaho water solution — provided the price and location are right. However, Otter is discussing neither, and that's reason enough to table this talk.