Water is the Lifeblood of Idaho, Part 2

In the late 1800s, Idaho was largely desert. Pioneers changed that. With horses, shovels, and relentless grit, they labored together, constructing canals that distributed Snake River water all across the Eastern Snake River Plain. By the early 1900s, canals stretched from eastern Idaho to Twin Falls. Dams and reservoirs soon followed.

Pioneers built more than infrastructure. They built an agricultural powerhouse–the backbone of Idaho's economy and the catalyst for diverse industries that sustain communities across our state.

In the latter half of the 20th century, electricity sparked another transformation. Land without canal access could now be irrigated by pumping groundwater. Some senior surface water users also drilled wells and became groundwater users–the priority date of their new groundwater right now becoming "junior" to those they had once been "senior" to.

Sprinkler irrigation improved efficiency, allowing crops to be grown with less water. But that efficiency had unintended consequences: less water returned to the aquifer. Over time, aquifer levels decreased and spring flows to Twin Falls reduced. Conflict followed.

Idaho's longstanding principle of "first in right, first in time" works cleanly along a river, where the impact of a junior user can be measured. It becomes far more complex when applied to an underground supply we can't see and don't really understand. This principle became muddied as courts–relying on incomplete science–assigned responsibility for changes in the water supply. Tensions between surface water users in Twin Falls and ground water users intensified through the late 1900s and early 2000s.

Litigation has cost millions. The settlements and mitigation plans that followed have cost even more. Agreements between surface water and groundwater users have been made and goals set, only to discover that–while progress was made–some goals were hydrologically unrealistic.

As conflict escalated, draconian groundwater curtailments were issued and wells tagged. This year, surface-water users face the possibility of similar curtailments. It is becoming increasingly clear: the risk does not belong to one group or one region alone. Without strong state leadership and better management tools, Idaho's agricultural communities–and the broader economy they support–are vulnerable.

Yet Idaho is not water-poor. We are blessed with some of the most abundant water resources in the western United States. In many years, millions of acre-feet flow out of the state for lack of storage capacity. Even in recent years when shortages were declared–such as 2023, when courts found that Twin Falls had a shortage–more water flowed over Milner Dam and out of Idaho than the volume of the declared shortage. We simply could not capture it.

Reality requires reframing the debate. The question is not, “Who’s to blame?” but “How do we maximize the available supply and beneficial use–now and for generations to come?”

For decades, we have relied on the investments of those who came before us. We have been figuratively riding the coat-tails of our forebears, but the infrastructure they left us was designed for another era. The cloth is growing thin.

Now it is our turn.

Like the pioneers, we must build. Thankfully we have advantages they didn’t: decades of experience, better science, and modern technologies they couldn’t have dreamed of.

State-wide resiliency should be our objective. That means building new dams and increasing reservoir capacity. It means using real-time measurement and modeling to make smarter storage and release decisions. It means strategically managing lands with both surface and groundwater rights–using surface water when the river runs high and groundwater when flows diminish–so limited supplies can continue downstream to irrigate land that depends solely on surface water rights.

It also means modernizing delivery systems. Lining canals and improving conveyance can ensure that more water reaches the end of the ditch in dry years. At the same time, we need infrastructure for targeted recharge, informed by research–capturing high flows and storing them underground rather than sending them downstream and out-of-state. And we need geologic studies all across the Eastern Snake Plain so that we understand where water goes when we do recharge.

Yes, we should pray for moisture. But then we must figuratively pick up our shovels and go to work.

This is not a job for one group or region–it belongs to all of us. Just as the polarity of water molecules binds them together to create a force powerful enough to carve canyons and move mountains, our shared stake in Idaho’s future must bind us together in common purpose. Pioneers built with horses and shovels. We have more efficient tools, but we need the same unity and resolve.

Through united action we can secure not only our water–but Idaho’s economic strength and stability–for every Idaho family in every corner of this state, now and for generations to come.