

Water Wisdom: Lessons from a Conversation Worth Remembering



During the summer and fall of 2022, I spent long hours visiting with water experts all across Idaho in an effort to better understand one of our state's most complex and consequential policy challenges. Among the most memorable was a conversation on September 12th with Corbin Knowles.

Corbin passed away unexpectedly on March 23, 2025, in a vehicular accident near LaGrande, Oregon. He was 49 years old. He spent 17 years with the Idaho Department of Water Resources before building his own consulting business, Basin Wide Water, serving farmers and dairymen across five western states. His knowledge of Idaho water was unmatched — and his willingness to share it freely was a reflection of the kind of man he was. I was a beneficiary of that generosity. Although I only met Corbin in person a handful of times, the hours we spent talking water while he drove between jobs made an unforgettable impression. I appreciated most of all the honest questions he raised and the possibilities he could see to improve water policy.

I share these ideas not as current legislative proposals, but in the spirit of the thoughtful, good-faith exploration that Corbin embodied — questions worth asking carefully, in a spirit of genuine inquiry.

On the tools we use to measure harm

One of Corbin's core concerns was the use of regional hydrologic models — such as ESPAM — to determine localized material injury. A regional model, he argued, is simply not the right tool for that purpose. Localized hydrologic modeling would produce more accurate and more equitable outcomes. Is the current modeling approach giving us the precision that fair water administration requires? Should we fund better geologic research?

On who bears the burden of proof

When a senior water right holder makes a call that restricts a junior user's access, Corbin believed the burden of proof should rest with the senior user to establish the fact and extent of the injury. He also believed the department should examine the senior's records — to verify that acreage is in current agricultural use, and to evaluate whether improved delivery efficiencies might offset the purported harm before curtailment is imposed. These ideas seem reasonable. Is Idaho willing to explore them?

On the nature of compensation

If material injury is determined mid-growing season, Corbin argued that compensation should be monetary rather than curtailment — providing relief in time, in kind, and in season without

destroying a junior user's growing season. Is there a workable framework for that kind of compensation? What would it take to develop one?

On the definition of water rights themselves

Corbin raised deeper questions about how water rights are defined. Could a natural flow right be defined as specific to the hydrologic conditions that existed at the time the right was established? Could groundwater access to the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer be characterized as a storage right rather than a natural flow right? These are genuinely complex questions — but they come from an informed perspective and seem worth exploring, particularly as the aquifer's boundaries expand to include new basins like the Big and Little Lost.

On the department's role

Corbin observed that the Department of Water Resources has historically been an allocation agency, but has been forced by the courts into a regulatory role. That tension — between allocation and regulation, between mediator and prosecutor — raises real separation of powers questions that deserve honest examination.

On the bigger picture

Between 1997 and 2019, an average of 1.6 million acre feet of unallocated water spilled past Milner annually — enough to irrigate 500,000 to 600,000 additional acres. Since 1984, minimum stream flows have been breached only once in forty years. These are not the numbers of a state without options. They are the numbers of a state that has not yet fully invested in its own water future.

Corbin's framework for moving forward was clear: improve delivery system efficiencies within existing entities; invest in the capacity to capture and store water longer than twelve months; and pursue targeted recharge as determined by aquifer isotope studies and localized modeling rather than regional modeling.

These are the practical insights of a man who spent his career in the water, who respected the farmers and dairymen he served, and who believed Idaho's water future could be both fair and abundant if we were willing to ask the right questions. They are offered here from my notes in his memory, as we face challenges and search for answers in the same spirit of honest, good-faith conversation he always brought to the table.