

## **Annual Meeting Summary – Unwrapping the New Settlement Agreement**

**TJ Budge** expressed gratitude for the water user community's efforts in addressing the year's challenges, particularly the traumatic curtailment event and subsequent negotiations. He introduced the 2024 Stipulated Mitigation Plan, a new settlement agreement for long-term water management in the Eastern Snake River Plain.

The agreement builds upon the 2015 settlement, which aimed to reduce groundwater pumping and increase aquifer recharge. However, challenges in meeting these goals led to the drastic curtailment of 2024. The new plan addresses these issues by establishing a four-year term with specific obligations for groundwater districts, including conservation measures and potential alternative projects. The plan also includes provisions for averaging water use and delivering storage water.

The agreement represents a significant step towards a more sustainable water management approach in the region, balancing the needs of both surface water and groundwater users. This plan is hoped to reduce conflicts and create a more resilient water system.

**The Idaho Water Resource Board Chairman, Jeff Raybould**, emphasized the importance of cooperation and respectful communication in reaching the new settlement agreement. Key elements of the agreement include decreased pumping requirements, provision of storage water, and averaging water usage over four-year periods.

Recognizing the challenges of previous agreements, Raybould stressed the need for a more sustainable approach. He highlighted the importance of stakeholder collaboration and the legislature's role in supporting water management initiatives. The plan involves increased recharge efforts and the necessity for additional infrastructure in the Upper Valley. He appreciated the legislature and the Governor's support in funding water projects.

**Skyler Johns, representing the Bonneville Jefferson Groundwater District**, outlined their crucial role in implementing the new agreement. He emphasized the significance of accurate measurement and reporting to ensure compliance with the plan's provisions. Johns acknowledged the challenges of managing water use and the need for collaboration with canal companies. He highlighted the potential of recharge projects and the importance of community involvement in achieving the plan's objectives.

**Adam Young, a farmer from Bingham County**, explained the new plan's impact on his farm. He emphasized the plan's two-pronged approach: individual farmer obligations and collective district obligations. He highlighted the importance of compliance, measurement, and collaboration with canal companies. Young also discussed the potential for recharge projects to support groundwater management.

The groundwater allocation plan provides a four-year block of water to groundwater districts, which then allocate it to individual farmers. Farmers have flexibility in meeting their obligations, including reducing pumping, converting to surface water, or acquiring recharge credits.

The plan aims to provide flexibility while ensuring compliance. Districts are responsible for providing mitigation water to surface water users if needed, and the new plan allows for mitigation with sources other than storage water.

Young discussed a Bingham Ground Water District project to free up natural flow water for surface water users. This project involves significant infrastructure costs financed through groundwater assessments. He emphasized the importance of maximizing recharge capacity and the need for farmers to consider their crop mix and water usage when planning.

**James Cefalo, the Eastern regional manager of the Department of Water Resources**, expressed the department's commitment to supporting water users and its efforts to expand the settlement agreement to include tributary basins. This expansion involves creating water districts, inventorying groundwater diversions, and installing measuring devices. The process will take significant time and effort, and the department will focus on specific basins over the next few years.

The department will hold public meetings and create water districts to regulate and manage all groundwater pumping that affects river flow. The creation of water districts will facilitate negotiation and participation in mitigation efforts.

Regarding domestic wells, new wells will need to be mitigated for irrigation use, while pre-existing wells will not be regulated. Basins are estimated to petition the plan three years after the formation of the groundwater district. The department emphasized the importance of having competent staff in groundwater districts to manage recharge and other operations effectively.