

Guest Opinion: Idaho water plan will adversely affect Boise River system

Changes proposed by the state of Idaho in the way water rights are managed in the Treasure Valley will adversely affect water rights in the Boise River system. The more senior the water right, the more devastating the proposal will be. The potential impact is so serious that Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District has gone to court to stop a misguided process that is contrary to a century of Idaho water accounting practices. NMID has exhausted nearly every effort to find a political or negotiated solution to this issue with the Idaho Department of Water Resources in order to avoid serious injury to our water right holders, but we have been stopped at every attempt.

This is more than just a NMID problem; all water right holders on the Boise River system will be seriously impacted if this scheme is allowed to take effect. The controversial IDWR plan centers on how to account for “flood control” water released from the three Boise River reservoirs to make space for water running off as the snowpack melts. Under a protocol more than 60 years old, controlled releases prevent reservoirs from becoming so full that huge amounts of water must be suddenly released to avoid overflowing the reservoir, resulting in downstream flooding. When the flood period is past, melting snowpack water can then be stored in reservoirs to prepare for the irrigation season. IDWR and the Idaho Attorney General’s Office want to reduce the amount of water allocated to all water right holders, including urban users, by charging for water released for flood control against the senior water right holders even though the water is sent downstream prior to the heaviest use of irrigation water and is never used for irrigation.

The IDWR wants to institute a plan where water right holders would be charged for using irrigation water they had no opportunity to use. That unused water charged against the user’s allocation will reduce how much water is left for irrigation. In a high flood release year followed by a period of drought, this could mean insufficient water would be left in the user’s allocation to meet irrigation needs. This would be disastrous to crops, lawns and gardens.

Boise River water rights consist of two types of rights: natural flow and storage water. Natural flow is the water in the river that may not be stored and passes through the reservoirs. Storage rights entitle the owner to water stored in the reservoirs where it can be used to supplement the water supply when the natural flow right is exhausted. Another element of the right is the priority date, this is the date when the water right was filed with the state and a decree issued. It dictates what priority the right has in relation to all other rights, often referred to as “first in time, first in right.” It means the land with the oldest water right gets its water first, next oldest second and so on until the available water is exhausted. Without the ability to store water to supplement river flows in the hot summer, the irrigation season would normally end in late June after the snowpack has melted. This process has provided a balanced approach since the first reservoir, Arrowrock, was completed in 1915.

With many avenues exhausted, NMID is requesting help from the public. If you are dissatisfied with this proposal, please contact your state legislator and let them know. We need to get this proposal changed to protect our irrigation rights in the Boise Valley.

Daren Coon has been Secretary-Treasurer of Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District for 26 years and worked for the District for 40 years. He has an extensive background in Irrigation District Law, Water Law and Public Administration.