

By Daren R. Coon
Secretary-Treasurer
Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District

Newcomers to Idaho may sometimes wonder why our state is dotted with so many dams and reservoirs and is crisscrossed with some 20,000 miles of canals.

This water short year of 2001 should have provided a compelling answer. Water is the single most crucial part of survival for Idaho's total economy.

In a year with near record low water levels, storage reservoirs have saved the day again.

Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District supports some 64,000 acres of farms, gardens and lawns; plus 6,600 residential and commercial lots using pressurized urban irrigation systems. The low water supplies mean we will stop delivering water about September 10. That's a full month earlier than usual. Fortunately, the stored water we had in the Boise River reservoirs meant we were largely able to supply all our users with enough water to get them through the farmers' growing year. That scene has been replayed at dozens of irrigation districts and canal companies around the state who get storage water from reservoirs.

The Boise River system with its two storage reservoirs plus Lake Lowell are like savings accounts in which we deposited what water there was from the low snowpack. Then, over the past few months, millions of gallons of precious water were carefully delivered via releases from the two dams. That water supported irrigation, rafting, fishing, aesthetics and a lot of other things we take for granted. In the Treasure Valley, those three "water savings accounts" were able to continue to supply irrigation water to well over 200,000 acres of land.

Without Arrowrock, Anderson Ranch and Lake Lowell, the only water available would have been the natural flows in the river coming from melting snow and springs. In this time of far-below-normal snowpack, coupled with our severe water shortage, Idaho's rivers would be mere trickles.

Without reservoirs, farmers across the southern half of our naturally arid state would have been out of irrigation water weeks ago. Without the stored water being systematically released from our reservoirs, most all of our rivers would be flowing at drastically low levels.

For Idaho farmers, storage reservoirs like American Falls, Black Canyon, Milner, Arrowrock, Palisades, Ririe, Minidoka and a host of others have made prosperity possible for generations.

Furthermore it's not just farmers. In our area, white water rafting trips on the Payette have become a major economic factor. This summer industry is made possible in spite of the dry summers by regulated releases of stored water from the Cascade and Deadwood reservoirs. After all, Boise celebrates the nationally known and financially successful Boise River Festival.

I haven't even touched on hydropower generated for our use with water flowing out of storage reservoirs, the flood control provided by reservoirs such as Lucky Peak, or the recreational value Idahoans place on water skiing, boating, fishing, sailing, swimming and other activities common to our reservoirs.

Idaho's irrigation reservoirs have helped bring 4 million acres under cultivation in our state and have created a Multi Billion Dollar agricultural economy. They have given us some of the lowest electricity rates in the nation. They have made us a national Mecca for outdoor, water-based recreation and tourism.

Without reservoirs our state would literally dry up and wither on the vine.