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Idaho private aquifer recharge organization breathes new life

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Courtesy of Idaho Department of Water Resources The milepost 31 recharge site within the Milner-Gooding Canal, pictured above, is delivering the most water into the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer this winter. Idaho Department of Water Resources officials say they've recharged 36,000 acre-feet this winter toward a goal of 80,000 acre-feet.

A private recharge organization is forming, aiming to provide a service for groundwater users seeking to reduce their consumption to comply with a recent water call settlement with the Surface Water Coalition.

IDAHO FALLS, Idaho — Past plans for a private organization devoted to managed aquifer recharge in the Eastern Snake River Plain have been resurrected, thanks to opportunities stemming from a recent water call settlement between groundwater irrigators and canal companies with the Surface Water Coalition.

The organization, now operating as Recharge Development Corp., has scheduled a symposium for 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Feb. 22 at the Idaho Falls Shilo Inn to discuss opportunities to build the aquifer, including their own effort.

Managed recharge entails intentionally allowing surface water to seep into the aquifer through unlined canals, injection wells and other porous infrastructure. Symposium organizers say they have seats for 400, and Idaho Falls Mayor Rebecca Casper will

give the keynote address. Guests may register at rechargedevelopment.com, or by calling 208-378-1513. The symposium will also be available as an online webinar.

A group of farmers and former water managers first attempted to start a private recharge organization in 2013, hoping to market the resulting credits to Idaho Groundwater Appropriators Inc. or to use them to irrigate new farm ground.

But IGWA was pursuing other options to mitigate for water calls at the time, and several water users opposed opening new farm ground with the aquifer still in decline.

The water call settlement, which requires junior groundwater users to reduce their consumption by a combined annual average of 240,000 acre-feet, gave private recharge new life, explained RDC spokesman Keith Esplin. Esplin said RDC now intends to recharge to help groundwater users meet their settlement goals.

“The symposium is to show the cities, government officials, farmers and everyone involved that there are other options (to meeting the required groundwater reduction) besides strictly curtailment and shutting ground down,” Esplin said. “We want to show them that it’s a big deal, but there are ways to solve it without throwing in the towel.”

He said the organization also plans to work with cities and industrial users in need of water, but RDC won’t look to open new farm ground until aquifer declines are reversed.

Dave Tuthill, an RDC organizer and former director of the Idaho Department of Water Resources, believes his organization’s effort, combined with a state recharge program, will put some of the 940,000 acre-feet of natural flows that pass unused below Milner Dam during an average year to good use. He said spring flood-control releases, and even storage water will also be recharged.

“We see large opportunities for recharge, even in a normal water year,” Tuthill said.

RDC has helped a couple of canal companies obtain private recharge water rights and is working to help some of them develop new recharge infrastructure.

Steve Howser, general manager of Aberdeen-Springfield Canal Co., has a private recharge right pending and will partner with RDC on developing a new recharge site. Though he has no financial stake in RDC, Howser was granted voting rights on its board.

Howser believes RDC will provide a critical accounting service to facilitate private recharge, and the plan represents a “paradigm shift” in Idaho to treat the aquifer like an underground storage reservoir.