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## East Idaho mayors look to cooperate with ag on water

[John O'Connell](#)

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John O'Connell/Capital PressBlackfoot Mayor Paul Loomis shows the empty Jensen Grove recreational lake. His city plans to add measuring devices and improve controls for filling the lake from the Snake River to utilize it as a managed aquifer recharge site.



John O'Connell/Capital PressBlackfoot Mayor Paul Loomis shows the inlet structure from the Snake River to fill Jensen Grove. His city plans to add measuring devices and improve controls for filling the lake to utilize it as a managed aquifer recharge site.

**Blackfoot Mayor Paul Loomis has a host plans in the works aimed at making his Eastern Idaho city a partner with agriculture in the effort to stretch a declining water supply, rather than an adversary.**

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BLACKFOOT, Idaho — Mayor Paul Loomis admits Blackfoot, like most Idaho cities, has done a poor job in the past of keeping abreast of crucial water issues.

As demands for the vital resource continue to grow, Loomis vows Blackfoot will be far more active in future water discussions, and he said the city has already started efforts aimed at better cooperating with agriculture to stretch Idaho's water as far as possible.

"More often than not, we have been adversaries — particularly with the surface water users — as opposed to a spirit of cooperation or collaboration," Loomis said.

In December, Blackfoot completed a \$10,000, comprehensive review to catalogue all of its municipal water rights. The city is also poised to start construction of a \$53,000 project — half funded by the Idaho Water Board — to install improved inflow and outflow controls and measurement devices at its Jensen Grove recreational lake, in order to conduct managed aquifer recharge there.

The lake was built for the city in the 1950s by the Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Department of Transportation when the Snake River was rerouted, at the expense of community access, to construct Interstate 15.

Loomis explained the city hopes to build a well to provide water to agricultural irrigators serviced by the Miner's Ditch. Recharge in Jensen Grove could help the city provide mitigation water to senior water rights holders in order to use the well. Loomis said the ditch, which ran too close to schools and caused logistical challenges for rail and highway transportation, was rerouted in 1962, and the city agreed pump the irrigators Blackfoot River water from a new ditch. The well would save power and pump maintenance costs, but the Surface Water Coalition has challenged the mitigation plan in court, Loomis said.

Blackfoot has signed a contract to collaborate on recharge — intentionally letting surface water seep into the water table to build the aquifer — with the private recharge entity Recharge Development Corp. David Tuthill, a partner in the corporation, said the business hopes to add additional cities to its client list.

Loomis said Blackfoot also recently hosted a meeting to organize the many small ditch companies that provide surface irrigation water to flood irrigate residential property in the city under a common umbrella. Working together, Loomis believes the ditch companies could access grants and install sprinkler systems, thereby drawing back former members who left in favor of city water and relieving demand for Blackfoot's water department. The next meeting will be March 24.

He said Blackfoot also implemented an ordinance last year requiring developers of new construction to offer secondary water sources for irrigation needs.

Loomis has predicted his city of about 12,000, located roughly midway between Pocatello and Idaho Falls, will double its population within the next decade. The city has been annexing new land lately, and Loomis emphasized the only other way to address residential water needs is to compete with agriculture for water rights and "buy and dry" farm land. Just a year and a half ago, Loomis said Blackfoot purchased 100 acre feet of water rights from farm ground.

"That is the least preferred option," Loomis said.

Idaho Falls Mayor Rebecca Casper, also a supporter of managed aquifer recharge, said her city council recently agreed to phase in water meters as part of its city water service to reduce household consumption, and prolong the need to “buy and dry” agricultural land. Implementing the plan will cost an estimated \$70 million.

“I personally feel the health of the aquifer should be a high priority,” Casper said.