

Statement of Congressman C.L. "Butch" Otter  
Committee on Resources  
Subcommittee on Water and Power  
Legislative Hearing on H.R. 862, H.R. 1190, H.R. 2563, and H.R. 3153.  
November 3, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

If there's one thing Idahoans understand, it's the importance of matching our limited water supplies to what seem to be unlimited demands on the water we have. Every year our water supplies face demands from irrigation, power generation, industrial and municipal users. Fish recovery and other Endangered Species Act requirements also take their share.

These demands are constantly growing, yet every spring we watch hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of water pass through our system that could and should be stored for beneficial uses. This is water that could be used for aquifer recharge, expanding municipal systems or even environmental mitigation.

I have been told that the days of building new dams are over. However, I am not that easily convinced. I convened a group of interested water users to look at additional storage opportunities in Idaho. The group is focusing on the Treasure Valley, but we are hopeful that success will lead to a similar process being used in other regions of the state. We are not just talking about building dams; we also are looking at adding to existing structures, off-site storage, recharge and a host of other ideas.

As part of this process, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in Idaho is undertaking an assessment of the Boise and Payette river systems. The Bureau built on my working group and established a stakeholder group to assess the opportunities for additional storage in the system, to identify specific opportunities or approaches, and to evaluate them based on a common set of criteria developed by the working group. The stakeholder group is reviewing more than 60 storage option studies already conducted on the basin from 1938 to 2004 as well as looking at other potential sites not previously studied. The options include new storage sites both on-stream and off-stream, as well as modification to existing reservoirs.

We already have learned a few things through the assessment process. I have been told that consumptive demand in the Boise and Payette basins will increase by at least 135,000 acre feet over the next 20 years. Growing demand now is being met by increased ground water use and conservation efforts, but those are short-term responses that beg the question of future needs.

We also know that most of the water supply in both basins already is allocated and there is little excess capacity to meet future demands. Further, the ability to capture and store additional water is limited by requirements for minimum fish flow, maintenance flows, flood control and annual refill of existing reservoirs. These factors make this undertaking difficult at best, but I believe it is worthwhile and necessary.

The stakeholder group started with more than 200 potential sites. That number has been winnowed down to 50 based primarily on hydrology or the potential for the facility to fill. Other factors being considered include special congressional designations such as wilderness, presence of endangered species or listed habitat, and potential impact on recreation.

The assessment's focus is on identifying sites with real potential for building additional storage. The stakeholder group plans on wrapping up its work next spring. It is my hope that the list will have been narrowed by then to a handful of sites that merit additional study.

As you know, Mr. Chairman, the Bureau has authority to undertake the next phase or appraisal level study. That will involve additional focus on the site or sites which truly have potential, and to proceed with a feasibility study. Authorization is required for feasibility studies, and H.R. 2563 provides broad authority for the Bureau to conduct feasibility studies on the Snake, Boise, and Payette river systems.

Some have argued that this legislation is premature and we should wait until we have identified a specific site to move forward. That simply is not an option Mr. Chairman. It could be two years before a specific site has been identified for the feasibility study. Since this is my last term as a member of Congress, I don't have time to wait.

Our communities, our economy and our families all depend on water to survive, grow and prosper. Deciding how to use such a rare commodity in a way that does the greatest good for the greatest number, while hewing to the principles of law and equity on which our society is based, is an enormous challenge. The task is further complicated, and brought into sharp focus, by the continuing drought plaguing Idaho and much of the arid West.

Our energy, our economy and our environment all will depend on the ability to anticipate and prioritize future water needs. Our children, our grandchildren and generations to come all are depending on the choices we make today. Preserving water rights while providing for continued growth are a top priority of mine and I will continue to work to achieve that goal.

Mr. Chairman, I ask unanimous consent to have the testimony of the Idaho Water Users Association submitted for the record.

Thank you again for holding this hearing Mr. Chairman, and I look forward to working with the committee to see this bill become law.