

Irrigation use of groundwater

Shows need for more storage

July 28, 2006

When the Bureau of Reclamation said it needed to use ground water for irrigation recently, the Klamath Basin got a pretty good illustration of how complex the local water situation is. It also points to the critical need for deep, long-term water storage.

During recent dry years, ground water pumped from local aquifers has been used to supplement water from Klamath Reclamation Project reservoirs.

The statistics say this would have been a good year to let the aquifers recharge since precipitation for the area is 3 inches above normal.

The Bureau of Reclamation said though, that, even with the good precipitation, the federal government has to maintain streamflows in the Klamath River to meet legal obligations to protect downstream fish populations. An unexpected decline in water flowing into Upper Klamath Lake developed in July and, despite believing that 2006 would be a year to let the aquifers recharge, they had to be pumped.

The Bureau's statement came in response to well-taken concerns expressed by the Klamath County commissioners, who questioned the practice of pumping groundwater during a good water year.

"It begs credibility," said Commissioner John Elliott, and it really does, though that doesn't mean we think the Bureau did something wrong. It's far more a reflection of the issue's complexity - and the need to push forward with the Long Lake Project, which would store water behind a ridge on the west side of Upper Klamath Lake. The proposal is under study by the Bureau.

The United States Geological Survey says it takes at least three years to recharge an aquifer.

If it can't be done during a "wet" year, when can it be done?

Pat Bushey wrote today's editorial, which represents the view of the Herald and News editorial board.