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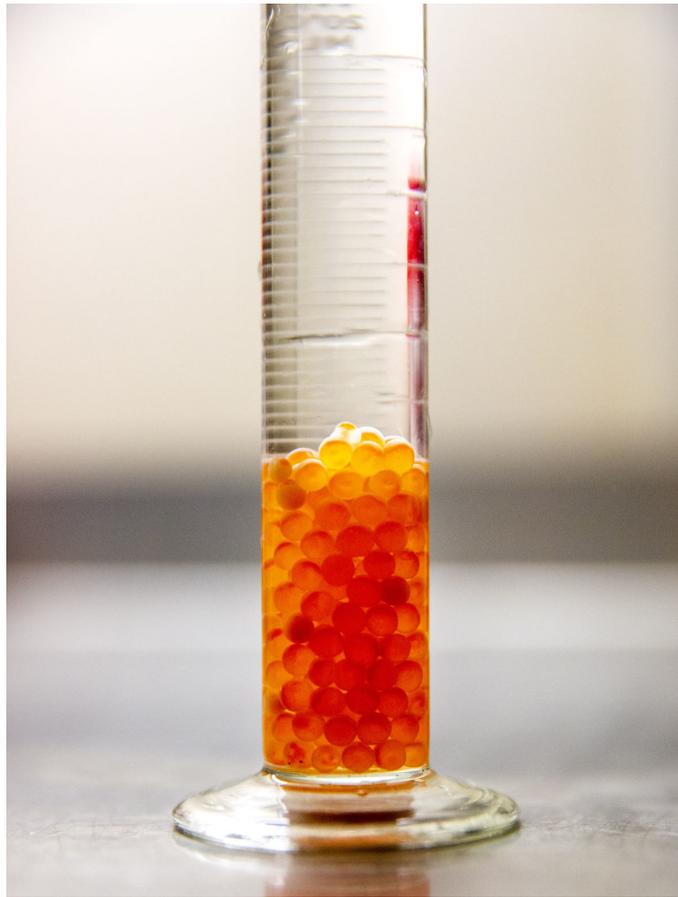
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FEATURED

Magic Valley water: Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer breathes life into the valley

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Scattered among the rolling hills and deep canyons of the Magic Valley is one of the area's most valuable resources. Just don't expect to see it.

Deep below the surface sits the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer, an underground water source larger than Lake Erie. According to the Idaho Water Resource Board, the ESPA covers approximately 10,800 square miles. It is the essential ingredient that's transformed south-central Idaho into the "Trout Capital of the World."

But decreases in the aquifer could put the industry at risk. Feuds over water rights forced hatcheries to decrease production or sell off farms.

Dirk Bogaard, manager of Idaho Trout Company, says the industry would not exist here without the ESPA.

“What you need for aquaculture is a consistent supply of high-quality water, and that is what we have,” Bogaard said. Unlike other locations that would have to pump water out of the ground or divert from a river, it flows freely in the Magic Valley.

“We can draw 2,000 gallons a minute out of a well,” he said. “You can’t do that in most places.”

Randy Macmillan, vice president of research and environmental affairs at Clear Springs Foods, says the temperature of the water is a major factor for what they grow. Rainbow trout need water that is clean, clear and between 50 and 60 degrees. The aquifer produces 58 degree water year-round that is clean enough to drink.

“Our fish are born and swim in drinking water,” Macmillan said. “We claim that we have the highest quality trout in the world and part of that is the water that the fish grow in.”

Because the temperature of the water never changes, hatcheries can fulfill market demands for fish in every season.

Many of the local hatcheries produce fish that are sold nationwide. But the Hagerman Fish Hatchery, owned by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, produces stock fish for ponds across the state.

“The purpose of the state hatchery is to provide fish for people to catch,” said hatchery manager Joe Chapman. They also help out endangered species like the sockeye salmon, which grew from a single fish — named Lonesome Larry — in 1992 to a thriving species today.

Though sockeye salmon are still threatened, Chapman is optimistic about their future.

“We’ve almost recovered that species,” he said. “Not entirely yet, but I see it in my lifetime that we’ll have a fishing season on them.”

Still, the industry is on the decline. Idaho Trout Company currently produces between 500,000 and 600,000 pounds of fish a year, a fraction of what it used to produce.



“We used to produce 10 million pounds a year,” Bogaard said.

Across the board, fish farms are operating under tighter restrictions and less water. Chapman says the state-run hatchery is working with 50 cubic feet per second (cfs) despite having a water right for 84 cfs.

Bogaard and Macmillan report similar findings of receiving less water than they’re entitled to. The cause: a decrease in the aquifer.

“There’s too many straws in the ground,” Chapman said. What used to be considered a limitless resource is now a commodity many are fighting for.

Hatcheries can make water-delivery calls against the state, but the process is often time-consuming and expensive. When Clear Springs Foods made a water call in 2000, Macmillan spent 11 years and three trips to the Idaho Supreme Court to protect the company's water rights.

On top of diminishing resources, hatcheries are also restricted on how much fish they can produce. The Environmental Protection Agency requires each hatchery to limit the amount of phosphorus added to the river. Phosphorus is a naturally occurring element and a byproduct of fish waste. Because hatcheries have "non-consumptive" water rights, all the water they use must return to the river.

The best way to regulate phosphorus output is by properly managing waste and controlling the number of fish produced. Since most companies say they're already handling their waste as efficiently as they can, the only option is reduction.

"As far as growth potential goes, you're limited," Chapman said.

One suggestion to sustaining the industry is implementing recirculating systems to reuse the water, but Macmillan isn't convinced that's a viable option. Besides the equipment being terribly expensive, he worries the water won't stay as pure as it is, which could affect the flavor of the fish.

The solution lies in recharge. The IWRB, groundwater users and surface water users are working on recharge efforts to replenish the aquifer by diverting water and reducing consumption.

As of April 12, the IWRB reported a total recharge of 453,988 acre-feet, almost double their initial goal for the year.

“We are all part of the problem, and we are all part of the solution. We're hopeful,” Macmillan said.

“Everyone recognizes that we have to do something now. Everyone is engaged in fixing this problem.”

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