
Photo: Snake River, Idaho; photo courtesy of Chad H

They say that travel is broadening. The recent experience of this Californian in the wilds of Idaho attests to the wisdom of that axiom.

Earlier this month, I had to journey to Idaho to attend a conference and give a talk. While there, I listened with interest as a former Idaho Supreme Court justice and water law expert mused that, a couple of decades ago, Idaho's greatest water-related fear was that thirsty Californians would somehow commandeer Idaho's water resources, transport them to the West Coast, and use Idaho water to fill Southern California swimming pools and irrigate Central Valley crops. More recently, he observed, Idahoans have begun confronting the fact that they have met the water enemy, and it is themselves: Idaho has become a mini-California, with ever-increasing population pressures exacerbating conflicts between Idaho agricultural and urban users, amid increasing, concurrent demands that a greater percentage of that state's finite water supplies be reserved to maintain and enhance in-stream environmental values. Sounds an awful lot like California's ongoing water wars to me.


Photo: Irrigation system; courtesy of the Wolf Creek Co.

No water resource better symbolizes the increasingly-intractable nature of Idaho water conflicts than the Snake River. The Eastern Snake Plain is to Idaho what the Central Valley is to California: an agricultural breadbasket, home to ranches, dairies and trout farms, homeland to an ever-increasing number of residents, and habitat supporting a diverse ecosystem. It is also a semi-arid region that critically depends on water from the Snake River and the related Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer for its survival. And the Eastern Snake Plain is embroiled in longstanding litigation over competing water rights to the Snake River and the related, conjunctive aquifer.

While in Idaho, I took time to explore the Snake River, following its sinuosities through the Eastern Snake Plain, pretty much all the way to the Snake River's headwaters in northwestern Wyoming. One visual picture from that journey remains especially vivid: while driving through southeastern Idaho on a dry, scorching afternoon (98 degrees at 4:00 p.m.), I saw mile upon mile of agricultural lands being irrigated with giant, rainbird-style sprinkler

systems. The amount of water waste was stunning: an obsolete, above-ground system of irrigation, being operated at the absolutely worst time of the day.

It would thus appear that California doesn't hold a monopoly on water waste. Indeed, the Left Coast, in the midst of its own ongoing and protracted water controversies, seems to be doing significantly better at conserving its finite water resources than at least some of its Western neighbors.