State engineer cuts supplemental water rights by 50%

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It was news no one wanted to hear and the messenger didn't want to give, but after outlining the extent of the drought and groundwater pumping, State Engineer Jason King announced a "curtailment" of 50 percent on supplemental water rights, those used via wells to supplement when less surface water is available.

The announcement, which came after a presentation at gatherings Jan. in Yerington — which featured more irrigation water users/farmers — and Smith Valley — which featured more residential well owners, since there is no municipal water system — outlining the law water supplies during the continuing drought, the lowering of the water table and the amount of pumping in recent years, was followed by a number of questions.

He said a formal written order of what he announced verbally would come out in a week or two.

He said NDWR staff would be out in the following weeks placing tags on irrigation wells notifying permittees of how much water would be available to pump.

King said they didn't take this decision lightly and they felt the groundwater situation compelled to do something or they would have many wells drying up.

"Please understand, we don't take these steps lightly," King said.

He didn't say how long this order would last, noting they would check groundwater levels after this season and see what impact it had and also if it turned out to be a wet year it might not have to be continued.

This step was taken to protect existing primary water rights and domestic wells, King said, and "protect the integrity of the aquifer and protect the long-term water supply."

In response to a question about whether this had been done elsewhere in the state, King said it was not unprecedented here but similar things had been done in other states. as part of a federal water program it would be up to the Truckee-Carson Irrigation District as to what would be done in the Lahontan Valley area and if cuts would result.

King said this did not impact domestic wells nor did it impact primary water rights from wells.

However, some comments from the attendees said everyone should do their part and cut their water usage.
Smith Valley resident and rancher Toni Garms urged domestic well users to take some action to cut water usage, perhaps to not have a big yard this year.

"Let's see you give something up, too," Garms said.

King, though, said the domestic well water use is very small compared to that pumped for agricultural use.

The Division of Water Resources would have more staff out in the Mason and Smith valleys, he said, checking on well usage and violators of the order.

"We're coming to commit additional staff resources to field monitoring," adding they would also expedite processing of applications.

He added he hoped to not find any violations, but if they did, violators would be subject to fines and penalties, including replacement of water up to 200 percent or $10,000 per day fine per violation.

"We'll work with all water users to minimize the impacts of the curtailment order," King said. "We'll work to make it as painless as it can be."

King and his staff began telling the gatherings the region is entering the fourth year of drought and weather forecasts only call for average precipitation or snow this year, which would t enough to take the region out of the drought conditions, as it would take a well above average snowpack and streamflow to do that.

He said there had been unprecedented groundwater pumpage in the two valleys and unprecedented water level declines and reports of well failures, and the likelihood of basin-wide well failures in shallow wells if something wasn't done.

Supplemental groundwater rights are intended to be pumped when there is not a full allocation of Walker River decreed water and/or storage rights. In such a year that isn't a full allocation year, as have been the past three at least, the available surface water is to be used before the supplemental groundwater can be pumped, and then only enough to meet the permitted acre-feet per acre duty.

Nondomestic wells in the two valleys have been required to have flow meters/totalizing meters since an order issued in 2000.

Talking about drought designations to see how the drought is extending, King in the presentation said last year 38 percent of the area was in D3 or D4 designations (extreme and exceptional drought) and now it is more than 48 percent; and the D4 designations had gone from 5 percent of the area last year to 12 percent.
Regarding reservoir storage as of the beginning of this month), King presented that Topaz Lake was at 8 percent of capacity, Bridgeport Reservoir at 9 percent, Weber Lake at 25 percent (up to 9, 10 and 27 percent as of Jan. 27) and Walker Lake at 40 percent.

He also talked about the snowpack in the mountains that the basin and he noted only three years since 2000 had seen above average snowfall. He noted the snow-water equivalent was 66 percent of average on Jan. 1 and 18 days later it was down to 42 percent. It was 35 percent of normal on Tuesday.

He also provided graphs showing streamflows now well below average and forecast to remain that way. He also cited the February-April forecast that showed normal precipitation and above average temperatures for 2015. Graphs also were shown how the less surface water was available, more groundwater was pumped in both valleys.

The Division of water Resources has 32 monitoring well sites in Smith Valley and 50 that monitor groundwater levels in Mason Valley.

Also speaking during the presentation was Rick Felling, a deputy administrator, while Reed Cozens, a water commissioner, responded to some of the questions.

Felling explained the preliminary figures for 2014 groundwater pumping showed more than 140,000 acre-feet in Mason Valley (the prior highest had been 120,000 acre-feet) and 56,000 acre-feet in Smith Valley, with 53,000 of that for irrigation and similar in Mason Valley. He said record amounts of pumping had been set each of the last three years.

King said usually there are one or two dry years but they are followed by a wet year, which allows the groundwater to recharge and return to normal, but recent years have not allowed that.

Fellling showed a map that showed wells from November 2011 to November 2014 and how much they had dropped. He said Smith Valley had 342 wells less than 150 feet deep and of these 269 are domestic, while Mason Valley has 279 wells less than 100 feet, with 139 of those domestic wells.

However, he said many residents don't have the resources to lower their wells.