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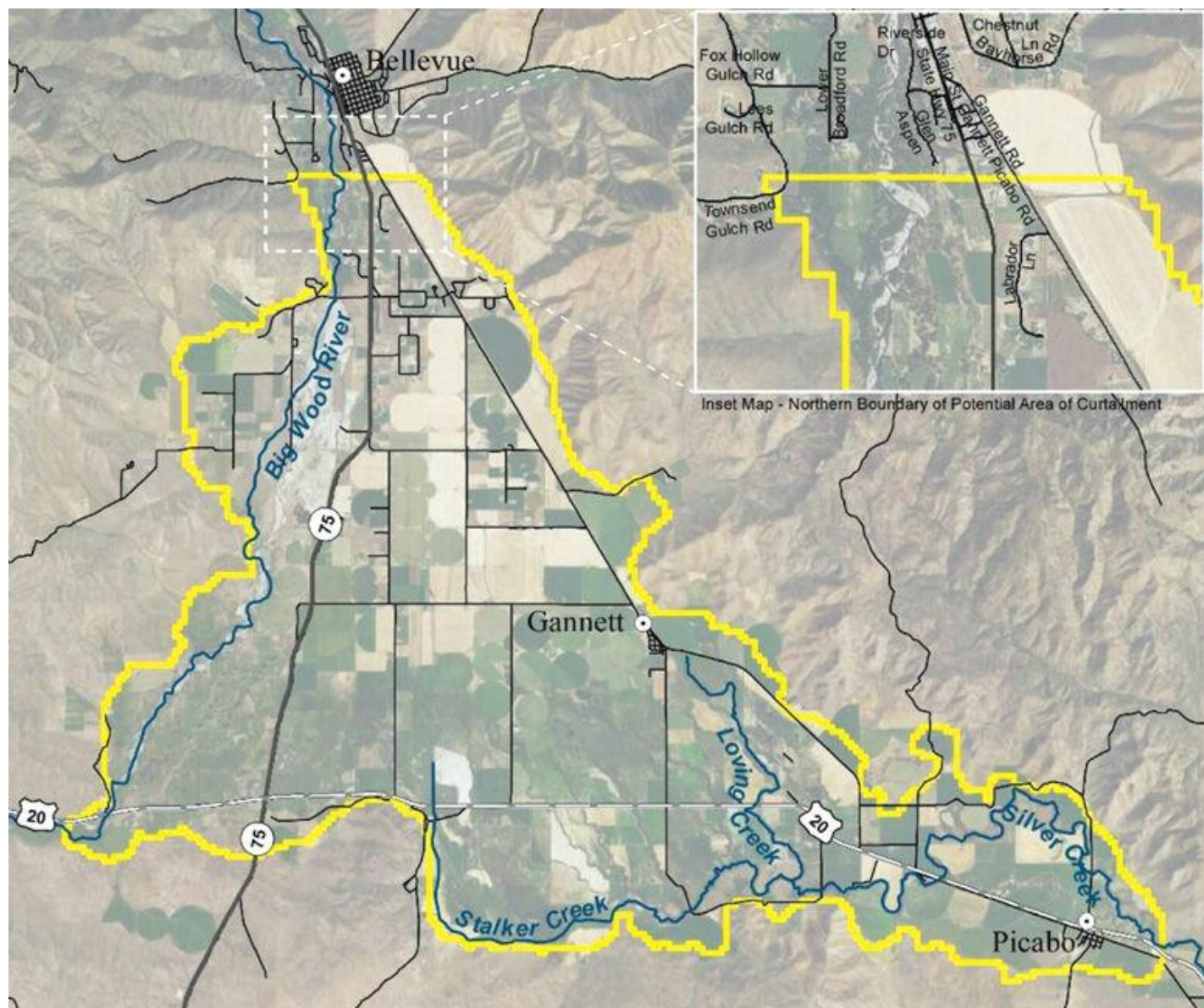
TOP STORY

Historic drought spurs water shutoffs in Bellevue Triangle

State orders freeze on groundwater pumping in parts of south county

Emily Jones

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Irrigators in the Bellevue Triangle—outlined here in yellow—will see their groundwater rights cut this week. According to a state order, the irrigators have “injured” downstream irrigators with excessive groundwater pumping.

Amid unprecedented, ongoing drought in the Wood River Basin, the state has ordered 140 irrigators in the Bellevue Triangle farming district to stop pumping groundwater.

The order—effective July 1 through the end of summer—was issued by Idaho Department of Water Resources Director Gary Spackman on Monday to conserve groundwater in the Wood River aquifer. It applies to all consumptive groundwater rights, including “agricultural, commercial, industrial and municipal uses” in the Triangle, located south of Bellevue and north of U.S. Highway 20.

By protecting the valley’s limited groundwater supply, Spackman said, the department could in turn protect downstream irrigators along Silver Creek and in Shoshone, Dietrich, Richfield, all of whom rely on surface flows from Silver Creek and the Little Wood River.



“The director concludes that consumptive ground water pumping in the Bellevue Triangle for purposes other than [home and livestock] uses ... should be curtailed as soon as possible in order to protect senior surface water rights diverting from Silver Creek and the Little Wood River,” he wrote on Monday.

Historically, farmers operating in the Bellevue Triangle district have used supplemental groundwater wells to irrigate fields of mostly grain, alfalfa, seed potatoes and mustard after their canal water is shut off or turned down in the summertime. Growers south of Timmerman Hill, however, have not had the same benefit due to limited or inaccessible groundwater sources.

With little water flowing out of the Wood River Valley this year, many south-basin growers in Lincoln County have already faced alarming pasture and crop loss. Exceptional drought conditions have prompted some to sell off their herds of cattle and goats.

According to Silver Creek-area hay farmer Larry Schoen, though, the hardship has not been limited to growers below Magic Reservoir.

“Every user in this basin recognizes that without irrigation, you can’t farm. Everybody understands the pain that’s involved,” said Schoen, a former Blaine County commissioner.

Along the banks of the Little Wood River near Shoshone, Cooper Brossy and his father, Fred Brossy, operate Barbara Farms. The organic farm produces organic edible dry beans, small grains, winter squash, potatoes, seed crops and alfalfa hay.

The family operation will be set back around \$220,000 this summer due to the water shortage, Cooper Brossy told the Express on Tuesday. To stay afloat, the farm has had to rent water from the city of Shoshone, which comes from the Snake River.

“Other guys ... are toast, they’re absolutely screwed .”

Cooper Brossy

“We won’t be able to establish some perennial crops this summer as planned,” Brossy said.

“We’ve had to purchase Snake River water so we can limp through this very short season.

“We are fortunate, though. Other guys along Silver Creek and off Magic [Reservoir] are toast, they’re absolutely screwed.”

Water issues remain contentious, intertwined

Spackman said in Monday’s order that he had the authority to protect south-basin senior surface water users under state law, citing a portion of Idaho code stating that well water should not be deemed “available” if its withdrawal significantly impacts surface or groundwater rights.

His decision came on the heels of a six-day hearing in Boise this month concerning water rights administration. Forming the basis of the dispute was the fact that groundwater, river water and spring-fed streams in the Wood River basin are not managed cohesively as one source, a practice known as conjunctive management.

Complicating the matter, many irrigators in Lincoln County and along Silver Creek have surface water rights up to 100 years older than the groundwater rights held by irrigators in the Bellevue Triangle, but are shut off earlier than their north-basin counterparts. This is despite Idaho's prior appropriation doctrine, which asserts that irrigators with older, or more senior, water rights have priority over irrigators with younger, or more junior, rights.

Schoen noted that after his 1886 and 1887 surface water rights were cut on Silver Creek, a groundwater well across the road with a water right 94 years junior to his was able to continue pumping.

"The effects of groundwater withdrawals in the Bellevue Triangle on senior water rights ... go against Idaho's prior appropriation doctrine," Spackman wrote in his order.

Altogether, Bellevue Triangle irrigators possess around 310 junior groundwater rights, which will be curtailed this week by Water District 37 Watermaster Kevin Lakey, Spackman said.

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"Everybody understands the pain that's involved."

Larry Schoen

Emily Jones