

Conservation a piece of the water puzzle

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By Ashley Langston, Reporter, Iron County Today

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This is the fourth in a series of six articles about water in Iron County. The first published Jan. 28 and the articles will run weekly through March 4.

IRON COUNTY – The Central Iron County Water Conservancy District is continually looking for ways to stop the decline of water levels in Cedar Valley’s underground water supply, and has taken into consideration the need for conservation, and the changes that could occur to the valley’s water use as growth occurs.

Conservation is an obvious first step. With that in mind, the district created the Water Conservation Advisory Board to research and promote water conservation.

Cedar City resident Doug Hall serves as advisory board chair and Candace Schaible, CICWCD and Utah State University Extension water-wise landscape and horticulture educator, along with representatives from Southern Utah University, the Iron County School District, Cedar City Corporation, Enoch City Corporation, and businesses Southwest Plumbing Supply and Rocky Ridge Landscape Rock also serve on the board.

So far, the board has worked primarily with Cedar City and the school district to encourage better management of water resources, since the two organizations are some of the largest water users in the area because of parks and fields, Hall said.

The CICWCD purchased new smart controllers for the sprinkler systems at two Cedar City parks and at Three Peaks Elementary, and the city and ICSD are [tracking](#) the amount of water potentially saved with the new controllers.

Hall said he hopes the results will be positive enough that the city and school district will be motivated to [install](#) more smart controllers and as a result, save more water.

In June, when the Three Peaks controller was installed, Hunter Shaheen, Iron County School District’s energy manager, said the pilot project was another step in the right direction for the school district, which has worked the past few years to balance attractive grounds and fields with fiscal responsibility and water conservation. While there were still some challenges, particularly with sprinkler systems with no central control box (primarily at older schools that have had building additions), the district has made strides since 2011, decreasing water use by about 36 percent, Shaheen said.

Hall said he has had positive conversations with Cedar City officials and he feels the city is making water conservation more of a priority as well.

The advisory board's next focus will be on businesses to encourage business owners, landscape companies and building owners to manage their water use. The focus after that will be on residents in general, Hall said. He added that while the bigger water users have been the primary focus, things have been done on all levels and conservation efforts will [continue](#). Free sprinkler checks for individuals and businesses have been performed by Schaible the past couple summers, and water-wise education has been offered for landscapers.

County Commissioner Dale Brinkerhoff said conservation is important and residents should be "practical," finding a balance between wise water use and a good quality of life.

While the CICWCD is certainly working on conservation, board members know conservation alone cannot bring the aquifer back into balance.

Agriculture as a whole is the largest water user in Iron County, as 532,464 acres (about 25 percent of the county's land), were [farmland](#) in 2012, according to the Utah Foundation.

Agriculture is also an important part of Iron County's heritage, and District General Manager Paul Monroe said county officials and the CICWCD board want to keep that heritage intact.

"It's not our purpose to go out and buy out all the farmland in Iron County and subdivide it. If it happens naturally, it happens," he said.

Brinkerhoff said all water in Utah is owned by the state, and rights are granted and controlled by the state, which is appropriate. It is a system that works, he said.

Those on a state level are also concerned with the health of the Cedar Valley aquifer and now monitor agricultural water users throughout Utah. Kurt Vest, regional engineer for the Utah Division of Water Rights Southwestern Regional Office, said just in the past year, the state has begun mapping water use in Iron County, and while it mainly keeps track of large irrigators, the majority of water users in Utah are tracked to ensure they are within their rights.

Vest said as the county grows, some agricultural land will naturally be converted to residential neighborhoods, and though the water right will remain the same, less water will generally be used.

Vest added that while many believe agricultural water rights are reduced or "cut" when they are transferred over to residential use, that is not true. One-acre foot of water right is 1 acre-foot even if it changes hands from a farmer to a municipality, he said.

Though agricultural to residential conversion will likely result in less water consumption, it will not make too much difference in the overall picture. Monroe said the aquifer is already being overdrawn and there are many unused water rights on paper that technically can be put to use as the population grows, further mining the aquifer.

In the Beryl and Enterprise area, when it was found that almost double the sustainable yield of water was being removed from the aquifer each year, the state engineer got involved and mandated that water rights would have to be retired.

The Beryl Enterprise Groundwater Management Plan was adopted in 2012, and requires 3,250 acre-feet of water rights be retired in 2030 and 2050, and the same amount every 10 years after that until the available water rights are in line with the average recharge.

This strategy has been rejected by the CICWCD board. Board members feel there are much more desirable options than cutting water rights.

Although the district's efforts in conservation and the future transition of agricultural land are part of the picture, neither will provide enough water to bring the aquifer into balance or accommodate future growth. For information about the district's large-scale projects, look for the next article in the series on Feb. 25.

Read more: [Iron County Today - Conservation a piece of the water puzzle](#)