

# County explores steps to protect aquifer

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POCATELLO — Bannock County has formed a team of technical experts to explore the possibility of creating a groundwater protection overlay area that would include regulations to protect the aquifer.

During today's City Council study session, a local geology professor will discuss threats to the Lower Portneuf Valley Aquifer, which is particularly sensitive in the southern part of town, and Bannock County's plan to protect it.

"I'll be talking about what we know about the aquifer and the reasons it's a vulnerable aquifer and some of the history of the contamination of the aquifer," said Idaho State University Geology Professor Glenn Thackray. "I'll talk about how it works, what its history is and ultimately why we need to pay attention to groundwater protection."

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# Groundwater

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The 25-square-mile Portneuf Valley Aquifer is the sole source of drinking water for about 65,000 people.

Bannock County is in the early stages of trying to decide whether it's appropriate to include a zoning overlay around the aquifer north of the Portneuf Gap area.

According to Bannock County Planner Steve Ernst, the county has been working with technical experts and representatives of main jurisdictions in the area — Pocatello, Chubbuck, Fort Hall, and agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service — to try to define the boundaries of the overlay and what sort of protection measures might be included.

"The city is really at this point just learning," said Pocatello Environmental Educator Hannah Sanger. "The presentation is an effort by the county to educate our community about our aquifer and raise awareness about some of its threats."

Ernst said the overlay plan is not similar to a previous effort in 2001 to designate the aquifer as "sensitive," which would have meant stricter rules on septic systems, stormwater runoff and hazardous materials.

The state would have had to approve the sensitive designation, but it never got that far. The effort, which was led by then-Rep. Roger Chase, ultimately died because of concerns by businessmen and developers that it would make it more costly to do business, restrict development and scare off potential new companies.

The 238-square-mile Rathdrum Prairie Aquifer, the only aquifer in the state with a sensitive designation, has had that special designation for almost 30 years. Representatives from that area met with local officials nine years ago and told them the designation was a benefit to that area.

During a two-and-a-half hour meeting, Kootenai County officials basically said it came down to, if you don't have enough potable water, you can't support your community. They said they had

received a clear mandate from the public: "Don't mess up our aquifer."

Rules governing that aquifer include sewage and stormwater management plans and hazardous materials regulations.

Bannock County commissioners at that time were skeptical about the sensitive designation idea, saying the aquifer could be protected using existing local regulations.

Thackray, who is involved in the county's overlay process, was adamant the current effort to protect the aquifer includes no intention of pursuing a sensitive designation.

"There is no push in this process to do that," he said. "There is a push to do what makes sense in terms of what's needed to protect the drinking water."

"They are not doing that," Sanger said. "Bannock County is looking at, locally, what protections are needed to protect our aquifer."

The Lower Portneuf Valley Aquifer shares many of the same geological characteristics as the Rathdrum Prairie Aquifer: permeable gravel, shallow water depth, thin soil cover and rapid water flow. Sanger said one of the main threats to that portion of the aquifer is high nitrate levels in some areas due to leaking septic tanks.

Another threat to the aquifer is from the solvent trichloroethylene (TCE), which has been leaking for years from barrels in the county landfill. More than 3,000 gallons of the carcinogen have been dumped in the landfill, though only a small amount of it has reached the aquifer and a treatment process is in place to remove it.

Stormwater runoff was another threat identified in 2001.

The current effort stems from the county's comprehensive plan, which was adopted a few years ago. One of the key objectives identified in the plan was the creation of a water resource protection overlay.

After the technical information is more fine-tuned, Ernst said, a broader group of citizens and businesses will be formed to further explore the idea to ensure it's workable and not onerous to businesses and development.