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NEWS

Area cloud seeding gets big boost this week

Published: Saturday, October 25, 2008 12:01 PM MDT

Generators placed in high elevations continue program from last year

JOYCE EDLEFSEN jedlefsen@uvsj.com

REXBURG -- Idaho's largest investor-owned utility has agreed to provide equipment and supplies toward a weather modification effort in eastern Idaho.

Idaho Power Co. has committed to supply three remote, radio-controlled cloud-seeding generators

with propane to run them and silver iodide chemicals to seed clouds, a balloon launching weather station and a meteorologist consultant to help decide where the best locations will be for the generators

and weather station for optimal results.

The commitment by Idaho Power is significant, according to Fremont County Commissioner Paul Romrell, the chairman of the cloud-seeding committee that oversees the operation of the multi-county operation in eastern Idaho.

The remote-control generators generally cost about \$50,000 each, Romrell said, though the power company has said it can get them for a discounted price. He's not sure of the value of the propane and the chemicals.

The cloud-seeding operation was launched last year with a \$120,000 budget, and Romrell admitted it was a "leap of faith" to start it late last fall without all the funding in place.

Several counties, a few cities, irrigators and others made a five-year commitment last fall to help fund the program. But it took a lot of arm-twisting and convincing to reach the goal.

This year, the committee had a \$150,000 funding goal.

The program is operated over a wide territory from Bingham County north by Let it Snow, a Dubois company that maintained the 22 manually operated generators that were used last year.

Last year, five generators each were placed in Clark, Fremont and Teton counties, Fremont and Teton counties, four in Bonneville, two in Bingham and one in Madison County.

The Idaho Power meteorologist will work with Steve Smart of High County Resource Conservation and Development in Rexburg, the technical adviser for the committee and with the contracted Dubois company to review the best locations for the new generators.

The advantage of the remotely operated machines is that they may be placed in higher elevations and more difficult-to-access places, since they will require little human maintenance through the season.

The generators can't be placed on federal land, however, because that placement would trigger potentially lengthy environmental studies.

While Idaho Power will provide the equipment, supplies and consultations, the committee will maintain control over the operation, Romrell said.

News of Idaho Power's commitment to the program wasn't the only good news the committee heard in an emergency meeting called Thursday in Rexburg.

Hal Anderson of the Idaho Department of Water Resources reported to the committee that a study on weather modification funded by the Idaho Legislature last year is nearly complete and will be offered to the Legislature in January potentially with a recommendation that the eastern Idaho cloudseeding effort received state funding.

"Everybody is interested in water," Romrell said. Even with the economic downturn it is a critical need.

A study conducted by North American Weather Consultants after the cloudseeding program was finished

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last spring showed the effort last winter produced an estimated 2 to 7 percent increase in precipitation, Romrell said.

This year's program is set to get underway as weather patterns allow after Nov. 15.

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