

FEATURE – IDAHO SNOWPACK STUDY HELPS WATER MANAGERS

INTRO: Researchers in Idaho are using a US Dept of Agriculture grant to learn more about how timber harvests affect water supplies. USDA's Pat O'Leary has more.

MUCH OF AMERICA'S CLEAN WATER COMES FROM FOREST STREAM FLOWS. IN THE WEST THE FLOWS ORIGINATE AS SNOWPACK. BUT HOW DO TIMBER HARVESTS AND OTHER FOREST MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES AFFECT THOSE FLOWS? THAT QUESTION IS PART OF A USDA-FUNDED RESEARCH PROJECT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO.

Tim Link, University of Idaho: With our project one of the big questions is how much increase in water flow and increase in the timing of flow results due to different types of forest harvests, specifically to look at areas that have been completely clear cut, compared to areas that have been uncut or areas that were thinned, where approximately 50% of the vegetation has been removed.

BY PARTNERING WITH POTLATCH, A PRIVATE CORPORATION, THE PROJECT LOOKS AT REAL-WORLD TIMBER MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES. AT IDAHO'S MICA CREEK WATERSHED, MULTI-YEAR MEASUREMENTS ARE YIELDING IMPORTANT RESULTS.

Link: One of the most important things we've found is that in the cleared areas, they accumulate more than twice the amount of snowpack in the forested area. We saw also a significant accumulation in the thinned area, which then came off the land quite a bit slower.

LINK SAYS WHILE CLEARCUT AREAS HOLD MORE SNOW, IT MELTS MORE RAPIDLY DUE TO SUN AND WIND. THINNED AREAS THAT HOLD SNOW LONGER CAN ACT AS A NATURAL RESERVOIR.

Lynn Rasmussen, Nez Perce Soil & Water Conservation District:: The two major types of forest management practices that are going on in our area now are either clear cutting or some type of thinning. And so the thinned area of research is very interesting to us, we have more water trapping. As it melts it will run off slower.

KNOWING THIS, LANDOWNERS COULD ADJUST THEIR TYPE OF TIMBER HARVEST BASED ON WEATHER AND WATER SUPPLY CONDITIONS. THE STUDY IS ALSO SHOWING THAT MODERN BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES USED BY FOREST MANAGERS ARE EFFECTIVE IN PROTECTING WATER QUALITY AND ECOSYSTEM HEALTH. IN MOSCOW, IDAHO, FOR THE US DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, I'M PAT O'LEARY.