

Fields Left Fallow: Idaho's Worst Water Crisis in Decades Exposes the Storage Gap Teton Dam Was Built to Fill

A Robison Institute analysis of the unfolding 2026 agricultural emergency and the urgent need for immediate, targeted action on Teton Dam feasibility.

RICHARD ROBISON/JUN 14, 2026



Idaho farmers are making heartbreaking decisions this June.

Across the Magic Valley and eastern Idaho's surface-water districts, irrigators are chopping lower-value grain crops early to sell as cattle feed, sacrificing entire fields, and idling hundreds of acres simply to stretch what little water remains through the season. One farmer within the Twin Falls Canal Company's jurisdiction sacrificed his entire grain crop. Another eliminated roughly 200 acres. These are not marginal operations — these are the productive fields that sustain families, livestock operations, and food supply chains far beyond Idaho's borders.

This is the documented reality reported by East Idaho News on June 12, 2026: Idaho is enduring its most challenging water year in nearly 50 years.

The Scale of the 2026 Crisis

A statewide drought emergency was declared in April. Snowpack in key basins sits at less than 40 percent of normal — in many areas, the snow “never fell this past winter.” Reservoirs across the Upper Snake system hold only 2.47 million acre-feet, compared with 3.6 million last year and a normal of 3.25 million. The system is roughly 1.2 million acre-feet short — a volume large enough to fill more than 45,000 football fields to the goalposts.

Surface water users are absorbing the earliest and deepest cuts:

Twin Falls Canal Company reduced allocations by one-third (33.3 percent) on May 28 — weeks ahead of normal timing.

North Side Canal Company and American Falls Reservoir District #2 each cut 20 percent.

Surface water users face a projected shortfall of approximately 181,600 acre-feet this season.

Groundwater districts in areas such as North Snake and Bingham are under active curtailment, facing sharply higher leasing costs, and struggling to meet a 75,000-acre-foot mitigation obligation with no meaningful aquifer recharge possible this year.

Alan Hansten, chairman of the Surface Water Coalition, stated the situation plainly:

“Idaho is in a bad situation. The snow never fell this past winter, so now we are dealing with one of the most challenging water years in generations... Farmers are already having to decide what fields to abandon to make it through the summer. The impacts... will be felt in our towns, our businesses, our grocery stores, and around kitchen tables across Idaho and our nation.”

Jay Barlogi of the Twin Falls Canal Company drew the direct comparison to 1992, when surface water users ran out before the irrigation season ended. This year the cuts arrived earlier and the pressure feels more acute.

The Storage Gap Created in 1976

This crisis is not simply the result of one bad winter. It reflects a structural vulnerability that has existed for half a century.

The Teton Dam was authorized and constructed specifically to address the very conditions now unfolding. Its reservoir was designed to capture Teton River runoff and deliver supplemental irrigation water to more than 111,000 acres in the Fremont-Madison Irrigation District and the broader Upper Snake Valley. It provided flood protection for Rexburg and downstream communities and created a buffer against the low-snowpack, low-runoff years that periodically strike the region.

When the dam failed on June 5, 1976, due to piping through fractured volcanic rock in the right abutment, Idaho lost approximately 288,000 acre-feet of active storage capacity. That water never entered the system in subsequent drought years. 1977 became the benchmark “worst water year on record.” 1992 was devastating for surface water users. Now 2026 is delivering another generational crisis — and the absence of that storage remains a primary reason the system lacks resilience.

The fields being idled and abandoned today lie squarely in the region the dam was built to serve. The economic pain moving through rural communities is the measurable consequence of that lost capacity.

The Delay of Broad Basin Studies

In recent months, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Idaho Water Resource Board approved an extended Eastern Snake River Plain (ESRP) Basin study. While comprehensive planning has value in normal times, this expanded, multi-year effort is unnecessary and counterproductive in the current emergency.

Idaho does not need another lengthy, wide-ranging study that examines every possible option across the entire basin while fields sit fallow and water deliveries are curtailed. The 2026 crisis has already identified the highest-leverage gap: the missing storage that Teton Dam once provided. Continuing to fund and expand broad basin studies at this moment functions primarily as a mechanism for delay rather than decision-making.

Idaho's farmers, irrigators, and rural communities cannot afford several more years of analysis while the storage shortfall continues to inflict real economic damage. The time for generalized study has passed. The time for targeted, site-specific action on the most promising storage opportunity has arrived.

Immediate Action Required

The Robison Institute calls for two immediate, concrete steps:

First, immediate funding for an updated, high-resolution geotechnical investigation at the original Teton Dam site. This study must employ the best available modern tools — LiDAR, advanced 3D subsurface modeling, detailed foundation and abutment analysis, and rigorous evaluation of seepage and piping potential — to transparently address the specific geologic conditions that contributed to the 1976 failure. The goal is not to repeat history but to determine, with current engineering standards, whether a new structure can be safely and effectively designed at or near the historic location.

Second, prompt convening of focused stakeholder meetings involving irrigators, groundwater districts, local governments, conservation interests, state and federal agencies, and technical experts. These meetings should operate with clear timelines and a mandate to develop a practical path forward for Teton storage, including design parameters, environmental considerations, cost-sharing frameworks, and permitting strategies. The process must be transparent, evidence-based, and oriented toward decision rather than endless deliberation.

These two actions — updated geotechnical work and structured stakeholder engagement — can and should proceed in parallel with any broader basin planning. They do not preclude other storage or management options; they simply refuse to let the highest-potential project remain stalled while the crisis deepens.

The Stakes Are Real and Immediate

Behind every percentage cut and every idled acre are families who have stewarded this land for generations. Businesses that depend on agricultural revenue. Communities whose schools, services, and tax bases are tied to productive farms. When water security erodes, the consequences do not remain in the field. They move through equipment dealers, feed stores, processing plants, and ultimately to consumers.

Idaho has built a national reputation as a reliable producer of food and agricultural strength. That reputation rests on dependable water. The 2026 emergency is a stress test the current system is failing — not because farmers lack skill or determination, but because the storage architecture contains a structural hole created in 1976.

The Choice Before Idaho

The snow will not fall reliably every winter. Climate variability is a fact. The question is whether Idaho will respond with strategic infrastructure that closes the storage gap or continue to manage repeated shortages through ever-tighter rationing and economic pain.

Rebuilding Teton Dam capacity — designed to 21st-century standards, informed by transparent geotechnical analysis, and advanced through genuine stakeholder consensus — remains one of the highest-leverage investments available for long-term agricultural resilience, flood protection, and water security in the Upper Snake region.

The abandoned fields of 2026 are not an abstraction. They are evidence. The Robison Institute urges state and federal leaders to treat them as such: fund a updated geotechnical study now (the Robison Institute already has a comprehensive technical specification and project plan, including cost breakdown, for this study), convene the stakeholder process now, and move from study to decision with the urgency this crisis demands.

Idaho's farmers have shown remarkable resilience. They deserve infrastructure that matches it.

The choice is ours. The fields do not have to stay fallow.