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By Hillary Hamm, Daily News staff writer
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There are plenty of "what ifs" about water use on the Palouse.

Allyson Beall is working with those "what ifs" and generating a model for the University of Idaho's Waters of the West Research Program that may more clearly identify the region's options for water conservation.

The Grand Ronde aquifer, which provides the only natural source of potable water in the region, has been reported to be declining six to 18 inches per year. The more shallow Wanapum - once the primary aquifer for the Palouse area - is stable because its use has declined since the 1950s.

"If there weren't people here, we wouldn't have an aquifer problem," said Beall, an instructor with Washington State University's School of Earth and Environmental Science. "If you want to be sustainable, you can't take out more than you're putting in."

Beall is creating a model in collaboration with the Palouse Basin Aquifer Committee and its Citizens Advisory Group that will combine "what if scenarios" of the proposed conservation and reclamation methods to calculate the cost and feasibility of the various options.

The model is based on algebraic equations. Beall can plug in figures that will account for water savings if Moscow pursues a proposed reservoir project, or Pullman converts several wells to aquifer storage and recovery. She'll compare those numbers with the outcome of boosted use of low-flow toilets or if the Palouse Ridge Golf Course receives money for an effluent water irrigation system, for example.

The model will focus on the effects the population has on the water source. The idea is to find how various combinations of use and conservation would affect the water supply.

Beall hopes the model - still in its infancy - will "help people get away from the 'good growth, bad growth' thing. Water is growth-related, but it doesn't have to be."

Beall also hopes the model will facilitate a regional conversation as it is developed.

"It's a way to get all these ideas out in the open," she said. "If people don't work this out, it will end up in conflict. We need to look at this holistically."

The model isn't meant to be predictive, but rather "a way to get people talking about the bigger demand issues."

Beall said she intends to present the model at the PBAC Water Summit in October. She'll seek more money to expand the project if the model is deemed a useful tool.

"Right now it's a preliminary version of what it could be," she said. "If the success of this is a little more social capital, it's a success. I just hope this doesn't inflame people or get them jumping up and down and filing lawsuits ... I just want people to start talking in the same language."

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