

Idaho Farm Bureau. Quarterly

Winter Issue • Volume 24 Issue 1

Big Idaho Potato A Hit In Salt Lake



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Idaho Ag, 8**

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14**



Embracing new frontiers

SALT LAKE CITY, Jan. 24 – We have just wrapped up our 105th American Farm Bureau Convention in Salt Lake City, and I am so grateful for the time we had as a Farm Bureau family to look to new frontiers in our organization and across agriculture.

There's nothing like gathering, exploring innovative solutions, and tackling challenges together to energize us for the year ahead.

I felt that energy across our convention, from the trade show to our inspiring speakers to our

robust policy discussions as we set priorities for the coming year.

Farmers and ranchers are always looking to make each season better than the last, and the AFBF convention helps us achieve that goal for our farms, our families and our communities.

Throughout the week, we hosted training opportunities and workshops to equip members and help them take their leadership and advocacy to the next level. We celebrated innovative and engaging programs from our county Farm

See **DUVALL**, page 6

The President's Desk

By **Bryan Searle**
President Idaho Farm Bureau Federation



Restaurant and ag industries top favorability rankings

Two industries responsible for feeding the nation are viewed more favorably by Americans than any other major business or industry sector.

Gallup, the national polling company, each year asks Americans how they view 25 U.S. business and industry sectors. The most recent poll shows the restaurant industry was rated No. 1 and the farming and agriculture industry was rated No. 2.

The polling giant asks Americans whether they view 25 business and industry sectors very posi-

tively, somewhat positively, neutrally, somewhat negatively or very negatively.

The nation's restaurant industry topped the favorability rankings for 2023 as 61 percent of people had a positive or very positive view of it, followed by the farming and agriculture industry at 59 percent.

The computer industry came in third at 53 percent, followed by the travel industry at 44 percent.

See **SEARLE**, page 6

Inside Farm Bureau

By **Zak Miller**
CEO Idaho Farm Bureau Federation



Defenders of Agriculture

Individuals who pursue agriculture as their profession frequently express sentiments like "I was called to it," "I am bound to it," and "I cannot leave it."

These statements and emotions are not feeble, and their significance is unambiguous. Such feelings are reasonable, considering the obstacles of prospering in agriculture and, at times, simply surviving.

Those who work in farming and ranching face daily physical, emotional, and spiritual challeng-

es. They have firsthand experience of the beauty and dangers of nature.

Despite being resilient, there are times when they need defenders. It takes a strong individual to defend those who regularly enter harm's way to protect their crops and animals.

One of the biggest threats to agriculture can be the public, who may have good intentions but lack clarity about what is best for the industry. In certain instances, they may seek to impose their

See **MILLER**, page 7



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MAGAZINE CONTACTS:

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation
EDITOR (208) 239-4292 • ADS (208) 239-4279
E-MAIL: seanellis@idahofb.org
ADS: advertising@idahofb.org
web: www.idahofb.org

COVER: See page 17 for a story on the Big Idaho Potato Truck's appearance at American Farm Bureau Federation's annual conference. Photo by Jacob Christensen



Idaho Farm Bureau Federation photo

About 200 people attended the second statewide conference in Idaho dedicated to farm stress.

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Idaho Farm Bureau Federation photos

About 200 people attended the second-ever statewide conference dedicated to addressing farm stress and farmer suicide. The conference was free to attend and held in Boise Jan. 4-5 by the Idaho State Department of Agriculture's Idaho Farm and Ranch Center.

200 attend second statewide conference dedicated to farm stress

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

BOISE – About 200 people attended the second-ever statewide conference dedicated to addressing farm stress and farmer suicide.

One of the main topics of the conference was addressing farmer suicide and understanding some of the warning signs to look for.

The conference was free to attend and was held in Boise Jan. 4-5 by the Idaho State Department of Agriculture's Idaho Farm and Ranch Center. This is the second time the ISDA has held this type of conference, the first one occurring in October 2022.

Part of the conference focused on tools

and advice farmers and ranchers can use to deal with financial challenges. That included a presentation on farm management strategies and farm transition and estate planning by consultant Dick Wittman.

Wittman formerly managed a 20,000-acre crop, cattle and timber operation in North Idaho. He is now a consultant who focuses on family business management and transition planning.

He emphasized the importance of detailed planning, setting clear policies, financial frugality and defining clear roles in a farming operation.

"It's not rocket science. It's Management 101," he said. "Every one of you here today should be asking, 'Does our business need professionalizing?'"

He said the key to the success of his fam-

ily farm is "a multi-generation commitment to running a professionally managed business."

A big part of the conference was focused on mental health on the farm and encouraging people to openly discuss the issue of suicide among farmers and ranchers.

Darla Tyler-McSherry, who was born on a Montana wheat farm and has worked in the mental health field for 29 years, spoke openly about her father's suicide in 2016 when he was 82.

"My dad was born on a farm and died on a farm of his own hands," she said, adding that before that happened, she used to think suicide was something that happened to other families.

The title of her presentation was, "Ask in Earnest," and she encouraged people to be

“Farmers take care of one another. Let’s have these important life-changing conversations and change the stigma of talking about mental health.”

- Darla Tyler-McSherry

willing to earnestly ask tough questions of people they care about in order to possibly save their life.

In agriculture, Tyler-McSherry said, farmers and ranchers tend to be self-reliant people and the industry doesn’t make it easy for them to say, “I’m hurting mentally.”

There has traditionally been a stigma in agriculture when it comes to talking about mental health, she said. “Luckily, we’re changing that attitude.”

It’s a myth that talking about suicide helps cause it, Tyler-McSherry said. “That has never, never, ever been shown to be true. We never want to think talking about it causes it because that is not true.”

She said one way people can help prevent suicide is by recognizing the warning signs, which include someone talking about becoming a burden or becoming depressed, loss of hope, and deterioration in personal appearance.

Tyler-McSherry said if someone suspects a friend or loved one may be thinking about taking their own life, the worst thing they can do is say nothing.

“What we can do is we can ask in earnest,” she said. “We have to be willing to ask the hard questions: ‘Are you OK? I’m really worried about you.’”

She said people need to be direct when asking this type of question: “I’m worried about you. Are you thinking about suicide?”

“The worst thing you can say if you’re worried about someone is nothing at all,” she said. “Farmers take care of one another. Let’s have these important life-changing conversations and change the stigma of



During a workshop, Jefferson County farmer Alan Clark encouraged farmers and ranchers to share their stories.

talking about mental health.”

Tyler-McSherry said if she could have people remember one thing from her presentation, it would be: “Ask in earnest and you may save a life.”

Panel discussions and breakout sessions on a host of topics were also held during the conference, including one titled, “Speaking Up for Agriculture,” which was led by Alan Clark, who farms in Jefferson County and serves on the Jefferson County Farm Bureau Promotion and Education Committee.

Clark, who also serves on the American Farm Bureau Federation Promotion and Education Committee, said with most of society being far removed from agriculture, it’s critically important for farmers and ranchers to share their stories.

“If farmers and ranchers aren’t sharing our stories, nobody else is,” he said. “Every farmer and rancher has a story to share and it’s important that we share it.”

Society is being bombarded by anti-agriculture voices and it’s vitally important they hear the real story about agriculture from farmers themselves, Clark added.

“Farmers and ranchers need to share their story,” he said. “You have a story to share. Share it.”

The Idaho Farm and Ranch Center website – farm.idaho.gov – features resources such as financial management trainings, guidebooks and videos on succession planning, tools and tips for managing a family business, and a calendar of events. It also has a link dedicated to managing farm stress. ■

Continued from page 2

Bureaus and recognized our outstanding Young Farmers and Ranchers through our competitive events.

One of my favorite parts of the convention is getting to walk the Trade Show floor and meet members from across our Farm Bureau family.

The Trade Show is the place to be, and you could tell by the lines of folks just waiting for those doors to open each morning.

It's also a place to give back, a value we share across our organization. This year, the Utah Farm Bureau organized the Miracle of Ag service project where event attendees helped to fill over 5,000 boxes of food for families facing hunger.

We kicked off convention by reigniting our advocacy on the farm bill. Farm Bureau led the way in 2023 calling for action, from working with groups across food, agriculture, conservation and nutrition to rallying our grassroots advocates.

And thanks to those efforts, we did see a temporary extension to protect farm programs for now. While we are grateful for that extension and understand that Congress needs to address the budget, we also know that we cannot afford further delays when it comes to the farm bill.

We are inviting folks to send a resounding message to Congress to deliver a new farm bill for our farms and our country. The road to a new farm bill has become longer than any of us would have liked, but together we can see it through.

We were also honored to welcome Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, a fellow Farm Bureau member, to our convention again this year. He met with all our state leaders to take our policy

questions head on, and then he addressed all our attendees at our closing session.

He is a humble leader and his commitment to agriculture shines through in his work. I am grateful for how our friendship has grown over the years.

The hallmark of our annual convention, however, is our voting delegate business session where our grassroots policy making process is in action.

At Farm Bureau, our members establish our policies, which rise from the county level to our state conventions and on to the national stage.

At our delegate meeting each year we ensure our policy continues to reflect the views of farmers and ranchers across the country.

We also saw this year that our delegates remain overwhelmingly family farmers who operate the full range of farm sizes, with almost two-thirds operating small and mid-sized farms.

I look forward to taking these priorities back to Washington. This is how we continue to work toward new frontiers in agriculture.

I am thankful for the hard work and dedication of our members and delegates as they set our direction for 2024, engage in their communities, and provide the leadership to ensure a bright future for agriculture.

I also want to take a moment to say a genuine thank you for the honor of being reelected as your American Farm Bureau Federation president.

It is a true privilege, and I look forward to continuing to serve you. As I mentioned in my keynote address, I see such a bright future for 2024 and I am excited to take on new frontiers together. ■

Continued from page 2

At the bottom of the list were the pharmaceutical industry (only 18 percent of respondents had a positive or very positive view of it), federal government (21 percent), oil and gas industry (24 percent) and the legal field (25 percent).

In my mind, this shows that when it comes to eating, Americans have gained a better appreciation of the nation's abundant food supply than in years past.

Everyone must and of course likes to eat, and Americans apparently appreciate the efforts of the people, including farmers and ranchers, who provide them their food.

Who knows, perhaps this appreciation stems from the COVID pandemic, when a momentary panic filled some people's

hearts when talk of bare grocery shelves and possible food shortages first started.

Thankfully, those worries were incorrect and put to rest when word got around that any bare grocery store shelves were due to supply chain issues and not actual food shortages.

As scary as bare shelves might have seemed during the early days of the pandemic, bare farm fields would have been downright terrifying. But that didn't happen, as the nation's farmers and ranchers didn't blink in their annual plans to grow

crops and raise animals.

Apparently, a lot of Americans realized this and had a new or at least renewed appreciation for the people that provide them their food.

On behalf of Idaho's and the nation's farmers and ranchers, we appreciate the American people's appreciation of our food production efforts.

On a related note, another annual study shows the economic impact the combined food and agriculture industry has on the U.S. economy, and it's huge.

‘Idaho’s strength comes from agriculture; it always has and hopefully always will.’

The 2023 Feeding the Economy report showed the combined food and ag industries contribute more than \$8.6 trillion to the U.S. economy, which is almost one-fifth of total national economic input.

The report also showed the industries directly support almost 23 million jobs and provide \$927 billion in wages.

The 2023 report, which is also broken down by states, showed the food and agriculture industries in Idaho are responsible for 370,878 jobs in the state, \$21.9 billion in total wages and \$7.5 billion in taxes.

Wow! Those are very impressive numbers that show those industries have a big

impact on our economy.

I point this out to highlight the enormous impact the food and agriculture industry have on the nation and our state.

Idaho is a major player when it comes to agriculture and ranks No. 1 in the nation in five agricultural commodities: potatoes, barley, alfalfa hay, peppermint oil and food trout production.

Idaho ranks among the top 10 states in 22 ag commodities.

Idaho's strength comes from agriculture; it always has and hopefully always will.

Recently, while attending some events in Boise with our elected officials, it was great

to see that many of them truly understand this and work each day to defend the rights of farmers and ranchers.

Thank you to our elected officials who pass laws that benefit or protect agriculture.

I consider it a privilege to be a farmer and say thanks to all the state's farmers and ranchers, along with our friends in the overall food industry, which includes restaurants and grocery stores, for producing so much food for the nation.

And kudos to Americans not involved in agriculture for recognizing and appreciating those efforts. ■

MILLER

Continued from page 2

beliefs about agriculture, resulting in disastrous consequences.

What does a defender look like? They protect a cause, principle, or group. Defenders are resilient, committed, and uphold their values.

Defending agriculture can require immense strength and courage for an elected official. Agriculture is the backbone of society, and at times, it demands tough decisions that may challenge popular sentiments.

However, true political courage lies in prioritizing the health of agriculture over short-term popularity.

Idaho is fortunate to have numerous legislators who strive to protect and promote agriculture. There are countless examples of their bravery and unwavering dedication, which cannot be fully covered in this limited space.

Nevertheless, in 2023, two individuals stood out among the state's many defenders of agriculture due to their exceptional courage, foresight, and resilience: Rep. Jason Monks, R-Meridian, and Sen. Jim Guthrie, R-McCammon.

Representative Monks took on the challenging task of tax reform in 2023. Amid various ideas, recommendations, demands, threats, and compromises, Representative Monks made sure to defend the interests of agriculture.

While it may have been easier to appease most voters, he stayed true to his commitment and ensured that the final tax bill passed during the 2023 Idaho Legislature did not unfairly burden agriculture. Idaho Farm Bureau Federation has a long-standing policy that tax burdens should not disproportionately affect agriculture.

Senator Jim Guthrie has worked to make Idaho's roads safer and ensure a reliable labor force for the state. Many Idaho workers lack legal status, denying them access to driving training and insurance, leading to increased road risks.

Senator Guthrie has been working on solutions to find respectful and practical answers to these complex issues, urging for

‘True defenders are known for their bravery and determination in adversity. They do not shy away from challenges or display cowardice.’

comprehensive immigration reforms at the national level.

Farm Bureau supports labor and immigration reforms at the federal level, and a program allowing those who are here working the ability to drive legally once they have passed a skills test and have proof of insurance, similar to many other states.

True defenders are known for their bravery and determination in adversity. They do not shy away from challenges or display cowardice. Instead, they confront challenges head-on, using their skills and knowledge to overcome any obstacles that may arise.

They persist until the threat has passed, showing unwavering commitment to their cause. Their steadfast dedication to their mission inspires those around them and is a testament to the strength of human resilience.

Being a defender is often challenging for people to comprehend fully. Dedicating oneself to serving and protecting others requires immense selflessness and bravery.

Our armed forces, law enforcement, and first responders understand the importance of this role all too well. They put their lives on the line every day to safeguard the citizens they serve.

Beyond these courageous individuals, another set of people demonstrate gratitude and admiration for the title of defender—the tireless farmers and ranchers who work to ensure that our society has access to healthy food.

Thank you, Senator Guthrie and Representative Monks, for defending agriculture. ■



Photos by Bill Schaefer

Sugar beets are harvested in this file photo. Total net farm income in Idaho declined by an estimated 11 percent in 2023 compared with 2022, as overall production expenses rose to a record level and total revenue declined slightly.

Idaho net farm income dropped by \$400 million in 2023

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Total net farm income in Idaho dropped by an estimated \$400 million in 2023, an 11 percent decline compared with 2022.

While total farm revenue in the state last year came close to matching the record set in 2022, total farm and ranch expenses in Idaho hit another record in 2023.

That included a huge increase in interest expenses paid by the state's almost 25,000 farms and ranches.

Net farm income – revenue minus costs – is the farmer or rancher's bottom line.

Idaho set a record for total net farm income in 2022, at \$4.2 billion. Increased production expenses, coupled with slightly lower total

revenue, resulted in an 11 percent decrease in total net farm income in the state in 2023.

The U of I report estimates Idaho net farm income in 2023 will total \$3.8 billion.

“Increased input costs, particularly interest expenses, led to a moderate decline in net farm income,” states the University of Idaho's annual, *The Financial Condition of Idaho Agriculture* report for 2023.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is forecasting total U.S. net farm income will be down about 17 percent in 2023.

Highlights of “*The Financial Condition of Idaho Agriculture Report: 2023*” were presented to Idaho



A wheat field is harvested in this file photo. Total net farm income in Idaho declined by an estimated \$400 million in 2023 compared with 2022.

lawmakers Jan. 4 by Brett Wilder, one of the U of I agricultural economists who authored it.

The report estimates Idaho farm-gate receipts – this is what the farmer or rancher receives for their commodity – totaled \$11.2 billion in calendar year 2023, just 1 percent shy of the record \$11.3 billion recorded in 2022.

But total farm production expenses continued to climb last year, totaling an estimated \$8.55 billion, 4 percent more than the record \$8.24 billion in 2022.

The higher farm production expenses were largely a result of a 42 percent increase in total interest payments paid by Idaho farmers and ranchers in 2023, Wilder told legislators.

Wilder said U of I economists “expect Idaho farmers and ranchers to spend about \$714 million on interest in 2023 ... Obviously, we have a lot more interest expense on the farm.”

Direct federal government payments to Idaho farmers and ranchers decreased 22 percent in 2023, totaling \$153 million. Idaho agricultural producers only received about 1 percent of total government payments to U.S. ag producers in 2023.

Most of those government payments in Idaho came through the Dairy Margin Coverage Program, which is an index that pays based on expected margins to dairy producers. Those 2023 payments reflected the tough year that Idaho dairy operators suffered through in 2023, as milk prices fell significantly from the record prices

recorded in 2022.

“For the first time in the history of that program, it paid every month of the year,” Wilder said. “Dairymen have tighter margins.”

Dairy is still the state’s No. 1 ag commodity in terms of total farm-gate revenue but total milk revenues in Idaho in 2023 came in at an estimated \$3.5 billion, which represents an 18 percent drop from the record \$4.3 billion recorded in 2022.

Total milk production in Idaho was up 1.5 percent in 2023 but “softer year-over-year milk prices led to decreased milk revenues ... in 2023,” the Financial Condition of Idaho Agriculture (FCIA) report states.

Total farm-gate revenue from the state’s cattle and calves industry is estimated at a record \$2.66 billion in 2023, 18 percent higher than the previous record set in 2022. Most of the increase is attributed to record beef cattle prices.

Total revenue from Idaho’s top crop, potatoes, is estimated at a record \$1.34 billion in 2023, a 14 percent increase over the previous record of \$1.18 billion set in 2022. Potato acres in Idaho increased 12 percent in 2023 and yields were up significantly compared to 2022.

This resulted in potato production in Idaho increasing 18 percent in 2023 and a new record for farm-gate revenue for the state’s iconic crop despite much lower farm-level potato prices for much of the calendar year.

According to the FCIA report, “The expectation of a second consecutive year of

record-high receipts is driven by high old-crop cash prices, higher reported contract prices for 2023, and higher yields, despite lower prices for open new-crop potatoes.”

Wheat in 2023 took back the No. 4 spot from hay among Idaho ag commodities when it comes to total revenue. Wheat revenue in Idaho totaled an estimated \$685 million last year, an 8 percent increase over 2022.

According to the FCIA report, wheat acres and yields in Idaho declined in 2023, leading to an overall production decrease of 5 percent. However, “Higher projected year-over-year cash receipts are related primarily to the timing of sales as reported by USDA.”

Total farm-gate revenue from Idaho’s hay crop is estimated to have declined 14 percent in 2023, to \$670 million. The state’s hay crop in 2023 was 3 percent larger than it was in 2022 and the revenue decline is due to a 12 percent decrease in prices.

The state’s sugar beet growers are estimated to have brought in a record \$504 million in farm-gate revenue in 2023, 25 percent more than the previous record of \$404 million set in 2022.

Sugar beet acreage, yields and prices were all higher in 2023.

The state’s barley farmers are projected to have brought in a record \$468 million in revenue in 2023, 17 percent higher than the previous record of \$401 million they received in 2022.

The barley revenue record is attributed to slightly higher yields and a 19 percent increase in prices.

During his FCIA presentation to lawmakers, Wilder pointed out that while Idaho’s economy is small overall compared to other states, its agricultural economy is large.

When it comes to a state’s gross domestic product from agriculture as a percentage of the state’s overall economy, Idaho ranks No. 5 in the nation, behind only South Dakota, North Dakota, Iowa and Nebraska.

According to estimates by U of I economists, agriculture in Idaho directly and indirectly accounts for about 17 percent of the state’s total sales and 13 percent of the state’s total gross domestic product. ■

Word Search

Chocolate

Answer key on page 18

N	O	U	G	A	T	V	S	L	I	Q	U	E	U	R	B
A	D	R	M	O	R	S	E	L	F	F	U	R	T	A	P
I	U	C	H	O	C	O	L	A	T	E	H	F	N	B	U
G	T	F	O	N	D	A	N	T	P	O	M	K	A	P	R
L	C	R	U	N	S	W	E	E	T	E	N	E	D	A	Y
E	H	E	W	G	F	L	R	B	R	I	S	W	I	S	S
B	O	N	B	O	N	E	T	I	H	W	L	G	X	T	H
A	R	C	Q	J	D	K	C	L	M	E	S	I	O	E	P
K	E	H	A	W	S	B	I	T	T	E	R	M	I	S	M
I	K	V	O	F	R	T	K	L	I	M	C	O	T	L	C
N	A	P	W	P	F	B	O	N	W	O	H	C	N	P	G
G	C	E	I	D	N	E	W	M	C	U	N	H	A	V	E
C	I	N	A	G	R	O	I	O	P	H	S	A	M	T	R
O	B	R	M	I	R	D	A	N	A	P	I	Z	R	A	M
P	K	E	N	B	E	A	N	C	E	S	H	P	K	Y	A
M	C	P	R	E	S	T	I	G	E	F	K	M	S	T	N

Antioxidant

Baking

Bar

Bean

Belgian

Bitter

Bonbon

Brownies

Caffeine

Cake

Chips

Chocolate

Cocoa

Confectionary

Dark

Dutch

Fondant

French

German

Hot

Java

Liqueur

Marzipan

Milk

Mocha

Morsel

Nougat

Organic

Paste

Powder

Prestige

Swiss

Syrup

Truffle

Unsweetened

White

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Get **\$500**
IF YOU WIN OUR QUARTERLY DRAWING*



*You're automatically entered into our \$500 drawing when you refer a friend, even if they don't purchase a policy. Visit: www.idahofarmbureauinsurance.com/about-us/refer-a-friend/ for complete rules and restrictions. Above left: Carmen Izaguirre from Gannett, Idaho, the winner of our 3rd quarter 2023 Refer A Friend, Get A Gift \$500 drawing.

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H-2A growth slows, but remains strong

By **Veronica Nigh**
AFBF Senior Economist

The Department of Labor recently released full fiscal year usage data for the H-2A agricultural foreign guestworker program.

Given agriculture's ongoing struggle to recruit domestic workers and a very tight U.S. labor market overall, it should be no surprise that H-2A program usage reached new highs again in fiscal year 2023 (October 2022-September 2023), though the rate of growth was down considerably from last year.

H-2A

The U.S. labor market remains very tight, with an unemployment rate that averaged 3.6% in fiscal year 2023, so it shouldn't be a shock that usage of the H-2A program remains high.

In fiscal year 2023, DOL certified 378,513 H-2A positions, an increase of 2% over fiscal year 2022.

This relatively small increase followed a very large increase in fiscal years 2021 and 2022, when the number of certified positions increased by 15% and 17%, respectively.

Over 100,000 (103,083) more positions were certified in fiscal year 2023 than in fiscal year 2020, despite an increase of nearly 19% in the national average Adverse Effect Wage Rate (the minimum wage employers who participate in the H-2A program are required to pay).

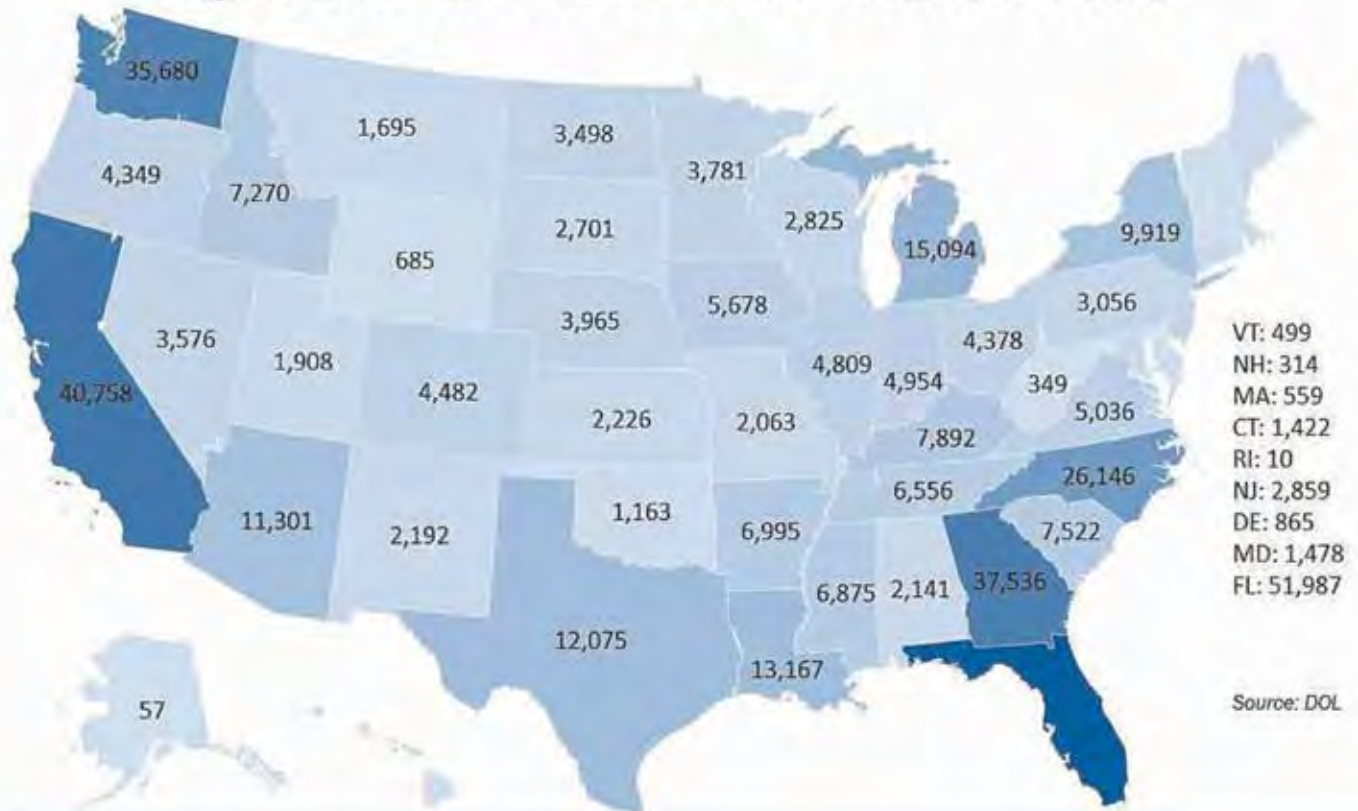
The top 10 states for H-2A program utilization in fiscal year 2023 mirrored fiscal year 2022's top 10. The top 10 states were: Florida (51,987), California (40,758), Georgia (37,536), Washington (35,680), North Carolina (26,146), Michigan (15,094), Louisiana (13,167), Texas (12,076), Arizona (11,301) and New York (9,919).

These top 10 states accounted for two-thirds of all certified positions.

In the past, we complained that H-2A program use information was unavailable for states that were not among the top 10 users. Thankfully, DOL has begun publishing H-2A Disclosure Data, which includes every H-2A application, so we now have information on program use for every state.

With the availability of more data, we now also know more

Figure 1. Fiscal Year 2023 H-2A Certified Positions



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Figure 3. Change in Number of H-2A Certified Positions, Fiscal Year 2023 Compared to Fiscal Year 2022



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about the distribution of certified positions for all states. In fiscal year 2023, 10 states had fewer than 1,000 certified positions, 13 states had between 1,000 and 2,999 positions, 10 states had between 3,000 and 4,999 positions, nine states had between 5,000 and 9,999 positions, five states had between 10,000 and 24,999 positions and five states had 25,000 or more positions.

From the H-2A Disclosure Data for fiscal year 2023, we know that the number of certified positions increased in 37 states and decreased in 14 of the 51 states and territories.

This was down from fiscal year 2022, in which there were increases in 48 states, no change in one and a decrease in two of the 51 states and territories.

Washington (up 2,631), Georgia (up 2,562) and Florida (up 1,014), all top 10 states, had the largest increase in certified positions, but the third (North Dakota, up 714), fourth (Idaho, up 711), fifth (Nebraska, up 607), sixth (Oregon, up 573) and seventh (Arkansas, up 526) largest-increase states are not among the top 10 H-2A-utilizing states.

Despite a national growth rate in certified positions of just 2%, 11 states and territories had double-digit growth rates in fiscal year 2023 compared to fiscal year 2022.

It is also worth noting that in addition to growth in the number

of certified positions in fiscal year 2023, there was also a 10.5% increase in number of H-2A applications that were filed.

This suggests that the number of operations that are utilizing the program is also growing, rather than the growth coming strictly from existing operations.

The average number of certified positions per application in fiscal year 2023 was 20, which is down two positions from fiscal year 2022.

This new record usage of the H-2A program was in spite of a record-high U.S. Adverse Effect Wage Rate – the rate most users of the program pay workers.

In calendar year 2023, the U.S. average AEWWR was \$17.55, up 6.8% from 2022. At \$17.55, the national average 2024 AEWWR breaks the previous record by 93 cents per hour.

Conclusion

The incredibly tight labor market is taking its toll on businesses across industries.

Continued growth in the H-2A program across a wide geography, despite rapidly accelerating AEWWRs, is a strong indication that the U.S. agricultural sector has been particularly hard hit.

For a growing number of operations, the H-2A program is the only viable option for staffing their seasonal on-farm jobs. ■



“The Defender of Agriculture Award is a significant and special recognition reserved for individuals who demonstrate an extraordinary level of leadership in the face of challenging circumstances and opposition.”

- Russ Hendricks, IFBF Vice President of Governmental Affairs

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation photos

After receiving a Defender of Agriculture award, Sen. Jim Guthrie, R-McCammon, speaks to Idaho Farm Bureau Federation members Dec. 6 during the organization’s annual meeting.

Idaho Farm Bureau awards first Defender of Agriculture awards

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

BOISE –Idaho Farm Bureau Federation for the first time has presented Defender of Agriculture awards.

The awards, which were presented Dec. 6 during IFBF’s 84th annual meeting, went to Sen. Jim Guthrie, R-McCammon, and Rep. Jason Monks, R-Meridian.

“The Defender of Agriculture Award is a significant and special recognition reserved for individuals who demonstrate

an extraordinary level of leadership in the face of challenging circumstances and opposition,” said IFBF Vice President of Governmental Affairs Russ Hendricks. “They actively promote, defend, and advance critical policy positions and actions for the benefit of the agricultural industry.”

The new award differs from IFBF’s Friend of Agriculture Award, which has for decades gone to legislators based on their voting records aligning with Idaho Farm Bureau Federation policy, which is

developed at the grassroots level by farmers and ranchers.

That award is based upon a lawmaker’s voting record over the two previous legislative sessions.

Hendricks said the organization “truly appreciates those legislators who earn the Farm Bureau Friend of Agriculture Award since they are supporting Farm Bureau positions and, therefore, are supporting agriculture across the state.”

However, he added, the IFBF board of directors, which approved the new award,



Rep. Jason Monks, R-Meridian, center, receives a Defender of Agriculture award Dec. 6 during Idaho Farm Bureau Federation's annual meeting. Presenting the award are Russ Hendricks, vice president of governmental affairs for IFBF, right, and IFBF President Bryan Searle.

wanted to be able to provide a special recognition to legislators who have gone above and beyond in their support of agriculture.

"Those who really tackled the tough issues and were not deterred by relentless opposition," said IFBF President Bryan Searle.

According to IFBF's governmental affairs division, Monks demonstrated an unwavering determination to ensure that no property taxes would be shifted onto the backs of farmers and ranchers as property tax relief for homeowners was discussed during Idaho's 2023 legislative session.

Hendricks said Monks was outspoken in his opposition to any increase in the homeowner's exemption and fully understood that when the exemption is increased, the reduction in property taxes that most homeowners would receive would only happen because the property taxes of renters, businesses, farmers and ranchers and even lower valued homes, would increase, thus pitting one group against others and picking winners and losers.

"Chairman Monks was fully prepared with facts and figures and was effective in articulately explaining why the opposition was incorrect in their assertions," Hendricks said.

Thanks largely to Monks, Hendricks said, House Bill 292, which passed 58-12 in the House and 28-7 in the Senate to override a governor's veto, accomplished two of Idaho Farm Bureau Federation's policy positions: to avoid any shifting of taxes through an increase in the homeowner's exemption, and to eliminate the odd March school election date.

"Thanks to Chairman Monks' efforts, everyone across Idaho saw a significant property tax savings in the tax notice they received this past November," Hendricks said.

According to Braden Jensen, IFBF's director of governmental affairs, Guthrie's leadership and character were put to the test while leading efforts to advance legislation on restricted driver's licenses and an immigration reform resolution during the 2023 Idaho legislative session.

IFBF policy supports labor and immigration reforms at the federal level. Until that happens, the organization supports a program allowing those who are here working the ability to drive legally once they have passed a skills test and have proof of insurance, similar to requirements in many other states.

"His efforts were faced with strong opposition and fierce criticism," Jensen said. "Despite personal attacks and push-back, Senator Guthrie did not shrink. He pursued this Farm Bureau priority with fervor."

Guthrie, chairman of the Senate State Affairs Committee, was successful in advancing these pieces of legislation through various steps of the legislative process in the Senate, although neither bill ultimately made it through the entire process.

"Nonetheless, Senator Guthrie showed outstanding qualities of leadership in remaining firm, despite constant and sometimes vicious criticism," Jensen said.

Jensen said Guthrie's efforts set a foundation to advance these issues in the future "and provide support, not only for agriculture, but for those who are among some of the most vulnerable in our society."

"We are so grateful to both of these legislators," Hendricks said. "When the chips were down, they stood up and proactively defended agriculture."

"It should be me thanking you," Guthrie told Farm Bureau members after receiving the award. "Having Farm Bureau support when you're running legislation is incredible. Thank you for everything you do to keep Idaho, Idaho."

"There are very few organizations out there that support conservative values like Idaho Farm Bureau," Monks said. "You guys do such a valuable service. Thank you so much for what you do. We won't be Idaho without you." ■

Grant to help UI Extension promote ag science skills, careers

By John O'Connell
University of Idaho

University of Idaho Extension 4-H Youth Development has received a grant to teach children about agricultural science and technology and introduce them to career opportunities in the field.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) awarded \$750,000 toward the three-year project, which aims to reach 2,000 to 4,000 youth per year during out-of-school time through 4-H clubs, camps, after-school activities and special programs.

Matt Fisher, a UI Extension area educator specializing in agriculture and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), and Mike Knutz, area 4-H youth development educator, are co-principal investigators of the project, which they've titled Agriscience Technology Pathways (ATP).

U of I's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs) secured two of USDA's 11 NIFA Food and Agricultural Nonformal Education grants.

The other CALs grant will fund a program submitted by Jae Ryu, an associate professor in the Department of Soil and Water Systems, empowering youth to design, build and fly drones during a workshop hosted in conjunction with the Idaho 4-H State Teen Association Convention.

Ryu also received about \$750,000 covering three years for his program.

ATP will be offered statewide and will encompass several facets. Fisher is developing learning kits to teach youth facts and science lessons about Idaho's major commodities – such as potatoes, dairy and sugar beets – working closely with grower-funded commodity groups.

The kits will be loaned to 4-H clubs, groups and camps in every region and will include lessons and hands-on activities, such as making a potato-powered clock or churning milk into butter.

Funding will also help overcome barriers to youth participation in 4-H programs where agricultural STEM curriculum is offered. For example, 4-H clubs or groups may receive funds to help cover busing, as well as youth scholarships to help cover day camp or convention registration costs.

Fisher and Knutz hope the funds will serve as a "carrot," enticing 4-H event organizers to add agricultural STEM curriculum to their itineraries to be eligible for the assistance.

In addition to the learning kits, Ryu's iDrone 4-H program and an agricultural robotics program Fisher helped develop are avail-



Matt Fisher teaches a STEM lesson to fourth-graders. University of Idaho Extension 4-H Youth Development has received a \$750,000 grant to teach children about agricultural science and technology and introduce them to career opportunities in the field. Fisher, a UI Extension area educator, is a co-principal of the project. University of Idaho photo

able to program organizers interested in incorporating agricultural STEM curriculum.

"We've attended 4-H coordinator meetings and talked about opportunities for transportation and scholarships and curriculum kits," Knutz said. "We're hoping to reach youth who may not currently be served by 4-H."

Fisher and Knutz will be partnering with AmeriCorps, providing training to the federally supported program's volunteers, enabling them to deliver agricultural STEM curriculum wherever they're placed in Idaho.

They plan to facilitate field trips to U of I Research and Extension Centers providing 4-H youth the opportunity to interact with Extension researchers and witness some of the many career options in agricultural science.

For example, their budget includes a biotechnology day camp to be hosted at the Aquaculture Research Institute at the U of I's Hagerman Fish Culture Experiment Station.

Jacob Bledsoe, an Extension specialist and assistant professor of aquaculture research, will lead hands-on experiments involving biotechnology and molecular biology.

"He sees in his own field it's hard to find graduate students," Knutz said. "He was very happy to be part of this program to help spark an interest for students to enter agricultural science careers."

They've also arranged for tours of the Buhl commercial trout farm Riverence in conjunction with the biotechnology day camp.

They've been in discussions with many other Magic Valley food processors and large agricultural businesses about hosting tours as part of the grant, aimed at raising awareness about jobs in the agricultural sciences.

"We have lots of different companies that are agriculturally based," Fisher said. "In talking with some of these companies they have a vested interest in keeping employees, and they would prefer to have employees from the area who are familiar with their companies." ■

Giant Idaho potato a hit at American Farm Bureau convention

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

SALT LAKE CITY – The Big Idaho Potato Truck generated a lot of buzz during American Farm Bureau Federation’s 105th Annual Convention.

The four-ton potato was one of the talks of the convention, which was held Jan. 19-24 in Salt Lake City and was attended by more than 4,000 people from across the United States.

The enormous potato and the truck that hauls it around the United States each year were parked in the convention’s trade show and drew a steady stream of curious people, most of whom wanted their picture taken in front of the gigantic spud.

“I’ve been told it was the talk of the (trade show),” said Idaho Potato Commission President and CEO Jamey Higham. “We were excited to have it down there.”

Created by the Idaho Potato Commission, the big potato truck brings to life an iconic and humorous Idaho postcard showing a humungous potato on the back of a semi-trailer.

It has been to 750 events in 49 states and has traveled 308,000 miles since its debut in 2012.

The public and media attention it receives everywhere it goes is incredible, Higham said.

“It’s the marketing campaign that just keeps on marketing,” he said. Wherever it goes, “There is non-stop people taking pictures and showing it on their social media across the country.”

A three-member Tater Team travels with the giant potato.

Kyle “Spudicus” Rauterkus, a member of the team, said people at the AFBF convention were “super excited about the big potato. We’ve got so many compliments from people about it.”



ABOVE: Idaho Farm Bureau Federation members have their picture taken in front of the Big Idaho Potato Truck during American Farm Bureau Federation’s 105th Annual Convention, which was held in Salt Lake City. Idaho Farm Bureau Federation photos

RIGHT: Spuddy Buddy poses for a photo in front of the Big Idaho Potato Truck during American Farm Bureau Federation’s 105th Annual Convention. The giant potato created a lot of buzz during the conference.



Rauterkus said if the potato was real, it would make roughly 20,000 servings of mashed potatoes or 1 million French fries.

He said of all the jobs he’s had, “This is by far my favorite. Especially when we

come to events like this and get to meet real farmers and people who are actually participating in agriculture and they tell us how proud they are of us, that’s what makes it really worth it to me.” ■

Country Chuckles

By Jonny Hawkins



Answer key for page 10 Word Search

N	O	U	G	A	T	V	S	L	I	Q	U	E	U	R	B
A	D	R	M	O	R	S	E	L	F	F	U	R	T	A	P
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CALS dean's new role a nod to importance of agriculture

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

MOSCOW, Idaho – The additional role that the dean of University of Idaho's agriculture college has assumed not only positions him to complete some big-ticket infrastructure initiatives for the land grant university. It also recognizes the important role that farming and ranching play in Idaho and in principle gives the state's agriculture industry more direct access to the U of I president.

Michael Parrella, the dean of U of I's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, recently assumed the dual role of serving as special assistant to the president for agricultural initiatives.

"It's a recognition, I think, of the importance of agriculture and the college," Parrella told Idaho Farm Bureau Federation. "So, in a sense, it's respect for the industry."

Parrella said the new title is also an acknowledgement of "the tremendous success we've had in the college in recent years."

The CALS dean reports directly to the provost so the new title provides more direct access to the U of I president. As a result, Parrella told IFBF, industry also has a more direct line to the president now.

Parrella's new role "gives us more access to central administration and a connection to the president," said Idaho Dairymen's Association Executive Director Rick Naerabout. "It's absolutely a win."

CALS oversees nine agricultural research and Extension centers around the state, where researchers study complex agronomic issues important to Idaho's



Michael Parrella, dean of University of Idaho's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, recently assumed the dual role of serving as special assistant to the U of I president for agricultural initiatives. University of Idaho photo

"His reputation with industry leaders allows for a deep collaboration and valuable return for producers in all agricultural sectors."

- C. Scott Green, U of I President

farming and ranching community. The college also maintains Extension offices in 42 of Idaho's 44 counties and three reservations.

The college has more than 240 faculty located on its Moscow campus and throughout the nine research and Extension centers.

Since becoming dean of CALS in February 2016, Parrella has told industry that he didn't become dean to maintain the status quo at the ag college.

Since taking the helm, he has begun or continued several big-ticket initiatives, including major upgrades of the university's Parma Research and Extension Center, seed potato germplasm lab and meat science center, and a new headquarters facility for the university's Nancy M. Cummings Research, Extension and Education Center near Salmon.

He has also spearheaded a \$45 million project known as CAFE that will be the nation's largest and most advanced research center targeting the dairy and allied industries. That project will include a demonstration farm, food processing research, and workforce development training for the state's agricultural industry.

Under Parrella's tenure, CALS has also acquired an organic agriculture center in Sandpoint and recently opened the Rinker Rock Creek Ranch near Hailey.

The CALS dean's new role "also recognizes the dean for everything he has done for the college, all those capital projects that are going to benefit agriculture," Naerabout said.

During a recent groundbreaking ceremony for the college's new, \$14 million meat science center, U of I President C. Scott Green told several hundred people he is a big fan of Parrella.

"He has many projects that are really incredible and doing important things for the state of Idaho," Green said.

"His reputation with industry leaders allows for a deep collaboration and valuable return for producers in all agricultural sectors," Green said in a news release announcing the new role. "He leads a team that has achieved record-breaking donations and research funding, innovative infrastructure upgrades and development and increased enrollment." ■

State of the State addresses water, transportation, property tax relief

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

BOISE – Gov. Brad Little’s recent State of the State address and proposed fiscal year 2025 budget recognizes the important role Idaho’s agricultural community plays in the state’s economy.

The governor’s proposed budget includes a substantial amount of money to strengthen the state’s water infrastructure, as well as hundreds of millions of dollars in transportation-related funding meant to improve the roads and bridges farmers, ranchers, and all Idahoans, rely on to get their products to market.

“One of the basic roles of government is to ensure a safe, connected system of roads and bridges,” Little, a farmer and rancher, said Jan. 8 during his annual State of the State address. “The continued prosperity of our businesses, including our farmers and ranchers, and loggers in rural Idaho, depends on their ability to get their products to market.”

Little’s budget proposes \$200 million in funding to improve dilapidated bridges in the state and \$50 million that would allow Idaho to bond for an additional \$800 million “for other badly needed transportation projects.”

“We’ll put the \$800 million toward the highest priority, highest value projects that have been in the queue for way too long,” the governor said.

According to Little, 900 bridges in Idaho have been rated poor or predate the moon landing.

Little’s address kicked off the 2024 Idaho Legislature, which typically convenes in early January and runs until late March or early April.

Proposals in the governor’s budget still have to be accepted by Idaho’s 105-person legislature.

The governor’s proposed fiscal 2025 budget calls for providing \$30 million to invest in state water infrastructure to “maintain and expand water projects in Idaho that help ensure a stable water supply across Idaho.”

Farmers, ranchers and others rely on the water stored in Idaho’s

reservoirs to get through the state’s hot, dry summer months.

Little said the state has “put \$1 billion to improve water quality and quantity in recent years and our (plan) also calls for the continued expansion of water infrastructure so we can ensure a stable water supply during both the good water years and bad ones.”

The governor is asking legislators to approve \$3 million in grants to help farmers, ranchers, dairies and confined animal feeding operations make environmental improvements. According to the governor’s proposed budget, “This will improve soil, water and air quality in agricultural communities in Idaho.”

According to Little’s press secretary, Madison Hardy, this \$3 million will be used to continue the successful Water Quality Program for Agriculture administered by the Soil and Water Con-

servation Commission, and Confined Animal Feeding Operations improvements sub-grants administered by the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality.

“These programs offer farmers and ranchers across Idaho opportunities to improve nutrient management, water quality and quantity, and modernize irrigation infrastructure to strengthen our state’s agriculture industry for generations,” she said.

Little’s budget requests \$6.6 million to continue the state’s aggressive response to invasive quagga mussels that were discovered in Idaho for



the first time last year.

“Our (plan) continues our state’s response to this highly destructive invasive species,” Little said.

Little’s budget also asks legislators to approve \$1 million in bonuses for wildland firefighters “to ensure Idaho Department of Lands can recruit and retain qualified firefighting personnel.”

The governor’s proposed budget calls for an additional \$150 million in property tax relief, in addition to the \$300 million in property tax relief already provided to Idahoans over the past year.

“No other state in the country has given more tax relief per capita than Idaho,” Little said ... “This is not our money. It’s yours and we need to understand that and remember it.” ■



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Making biochar in the forest

By Chris Schnepf
University of Idaho

Five years ago, I wrote in this column about the value of biochar in forestry and agriculture. The term “biochar” may conjure images of technically advanced bioengineering, which it can be, but it is essentially just making charcoal, which humans have been doing for thousands of years.

Since writing that column, interest in biochar has continued growing, not only for what it can do to improve certain soils and the growth of plants and trees that grow in them but also for a variety of other benefits, including helping native plants compete with noxious weeds, increasing plant available water, reducing smoke from slash burning, and reducing pile burning soil impacts (burned slash piles can leave inert burn scars that can last decades or longer on some sites).

Biochar also sequesters carbon, leaving more carbon in a forest than complete combustion of slash piles, and biochar can last decades or even hundreds of years longer than the slash used to make it would have if slash had been left to decompose.

In “Biomass to Biochar: Maximizing the Carbon Value,” a 184-page document produced by over 40 experts who met in a series of online workshops in 2018 (downloadable at <https://csanr.wsu.edu/biomass2biochar>), authors outlined three levels of biochar production: 1) large-scale, centralized biochar production, 2) moderate-scale biochar production, and 3) place-based biochar production.

This column focuses on the latter.

Many of the medium and larger-scale biochar production technologies can be very sophisticated, often producing bio-oil, gas, usable heat, or other products.

Place-based systems only focus on reducing hazardous fuels and creating biochar and immediately associated benefits, such as more flexibility in treating slash during times and places where conventional slash pile burning could create unacceptably high levels of smoke, or burning is restricted.

Small biochar kilns area available for your backyard. Photo by Chris Schnepf

There are three types of place-based biochar techniques: 1) slash piles modified to produce biochar, 2) box and circular kilns, and 3) mobile air curtain kilns.

The fundamental process in all these techniques is burning biomass long enough for the wood to coal up, but not so long that the charcoal burns to ash.

You can create biochar onsite simply by modifying slash piles. Such “conservation piles” are built by stacking larger pieces (> 4” diameter) at the base, perpendicular to each other, the same way many of us were taught to build campfires.

This keeps heat away from the ground to reduce soil impacts and creates airflow throughout the pile. You then keep adding to this pile in the same way, using ever smaller materials as you get to the top.

The pile is then lit at or near the top to create a “flame cap,” which directs more of the smoke and particulates back into the fire to be re-burned.

Once the flames go out, the coals must be quenched with water or dirt to get the most biochar. For more information see <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/scientifica/2017/2745764/>

The next step up from biochar-focused slash piles are kilns. Most biochar kilns are simply metal boxes or rings in which slash is burned, coals are extinguished, then the device is turned over and the biochar spills out as a batch.

These kilns range in size from 30” backyard models to “big box” kilns up to 12 feet long.

Variations on kilns include: kilns that come in pieces which can be assembled on site, making transport to the site easier; double-wall construction, which helps trap heat for the process and protects people hand-loading woody material into the kiln from the heat somewhat; and kilns with a lid that can be placed on top of the

kiln to stop combustion by removing oxygen (handy if you do not

have a water source to quench the coals).

Box kilns are also lit from the top to establish a flame cap to direct embers and other particulates back into the fire. They do this more effectively than slash piles because the sides of the fire are closed in by kiln walls.

For detailed information on place-based biochar kilns and how to use them, see Chapter 4 in the previously mentioned “Biomass to Biochar” document.

The most sophisticated type of place-based biochar kilns are portable air curtain burners, called that because a curtain of air is actively blown over the top of the burning slash to direct smoke and other particulates back to the fire for reburning.

For a good, illustrated description of this process, see <https://airburners.com/technology/principle/>

One of the best examples of this technology is the “CharBoss,” a portable air curtain burner that continuously produces biochar. The machine was developed cooperatively between the U.S. Forest Service and Air Burners, Inc.

The equipment is hauled to a forest site and used to create biochar. The machine uses a diesel engine to create the air curtain and power a belt which conveys charcoal from the bottom of the machine to a quench pan.

For more information on the CharBoss, see <https://airburners.com/products/boss-series/charboss/>

What to do with the biochar now that you’ve made it?

You could leave the biochar in place where it is created and you will get some of the benefits of it (reduced smoke, sequestered carbon, etc.) but to get the soil benefit, you need to distribute the material across a site.

In forests, the biochar is generally just spread across the soil surface without being actively incorporated deeper into the soil. Over time the material will settle into the soil naturally from snow and rain melt.

The U.S. Forest Service developed a biochar spreader (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/research/treesearch/52309>) which is a modified salt spreader, but manure or fertilizer spreaders can also be effective for spreading biochar on forest sites.

The biochar is typically broken up into

smaller pieces as it is handled and distributed. It will also break up further as fungi, freeze-thaw action, or plant and tree roots work their way through it.

Actively incorporating biochar deeper into the soil is useful to de-compact log landings or skid trails, where there are no surface organic horizons.

Most biochar kilns require accessories. At a minimum you often need a water source to quench the coals with (e.g., a water tank in the back of a pickup, or a nearby stream you can pump water from).

Larger biochar kilns and the air curtain burners often require an excavator or something similar to load slash into and to empty the kiln after biochar is created.

ATVs or similar machines could be useful in getting slash to the biochar production kiln or distributing biochar across the site, much as ATVs have been used for small-scale logging.

There are also important safety considerations when creating biochar, similar to practices you would follow for burning standard slash piles. For example, avoid burning when fire danger is high (though biochar kilns and air curtain burners are often less likely to send out embers than conventional slash pile burning, to the extent particulates are directed back into the fire), build a fire break around the unit, wear cotton or wool clothing (avoid flammable synthetics), and have firefighting tools on hand (the water used to quench coals also serves that purpose).

Last summer over 65 forest owners, foresters, loggers and others participated in a University of Idaho Extension program in Sandpoint titled “Making and Using Biochar.”

One of the highlights of the day was a demonstration at a site on Schweitzer Mountain of the technologies described in this column. Extension plans to offer another field day on the topic in Orofino in April. ■

Thanks to Deb Page-Dumroese for review and comments on this article.

Chris Schnepf is an area extension educator in forestry for the University of Idaho in Bonner, Boundary, Kootenai and Benewah counties. He can be reached at cschnepf@uidaho.edu.





Photo by John O'Connell

Hayden Woods, a graduate student studying plant pathology, left, and James Woodhall, an associate professor of plant pathology, look for sugar beet plants with symptoms of *Cercospora* in a research field at the University of Idaho Parma Research and Extension Center in the fall of 2023.

U of I researchers target sugar beet disease

By **John O'Connell**
University of Idaho

PARMA – University of Idaho researchers have promising leads on management practices and new pesticide options to help the state's sugar beet farmers get a handle on a fungal disease that's posing an increasing threat in their fields.

Cercospora beticola thrives in moist, warm conditions and creates necrotic spots on sugar beet leaves. Plants expend their energy regrowing dead or damaged leaves at the expense of sugar production, resulting in yield losses of up to 40% in susceptible cultivars.

James Woodhall, an associate professor of plant pathology based at the U of I Parma Research and Extension Center, and his graduate student, Hayden Woods, obtained an \$18,000 grant through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's IR-4 Project to evaluate seven different fungicide programs for controlling the disease.

IR-4 develops data for the registration of safe and effective pest management solutions for specialty crops with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Amalgamated Sugar Co. is conducting separate trials assessing the same fungicide programs.

"This is a sugar beet disease that is gaining importance in Idaho.

“The long-term approach is we need to have resistant varieties. Our near-term approach is we need cultural management and we need additional chemical management options.”

*- James Woodhall, associate professor, U of I
Parma Research and Extension Center*

It just seems to be getting more and more severe,” Woodhall said. “It was first found in Idaho in the 1960s, but it’s slowly getting worse.”

Woodhall believes a combination of factors have contributed to mounting grower headaches from *Cercospora beticola*.

Changes in irrigation likely play a role, as most farmers have switched from in-furrow irrigation to overhead sprinklers, which moisten leaves and create favorable conditions for spores.

He also suspects the disease is entering the state on growers’ sugar beet seed and is likely over-wintering in infected sugar beet tissue in fields.

Large *Cercospora* spores don’t travel far but can take hold in adjacent fields and spread slowly from one field to the next.

Perhaps the greatest challenge growers face in managing *Cercospora* is that it quickly develops resistance to pesticides. Woodhall and Woods have sought to identify new modes of action to include in pesticide programs to avoid the onset of resistance to commonly used products.

“The long-term approach is we need to have resistant varieties,” Woodhall said. “Our near-term approach is we need cultural management and we need additional chemical management options.”

Woodhall and Woods enjoyed good results with a treatment regime that included an application of a fungicide that’s already labeled for sugar beets but not widely used, containing the active ingredient thiophanate-methyl.

The addition of that product contributed to a 67% reduction in disease pressure, compared with a 35% reduction resulting from a comparable program that didn’t include thiophanate-methyl.

They also found two fungicides that aren’t currently labeled for sugar beets that provided strong control against *Cercospora beticola*.

When applied four times throughout the season, one product reduced disease pressure by 44%. Four applications of the other promising prod-

uct reduced pressure by 31%.

Furthermore, a promising new biological product reduced disease pressure by 40%.

It would likely take three to four years to get special-needs labels approved for any of the products that aren’t currently labeled for sugar beets.

“These are screening trials just to see if it works and how it performs. Once we get all of this data back, if it looks good it will be tested for crop residues,” said Ronda Hirnyck, UI Extension pesticide specialist and principal investigator for U of I’s IR4 Project. “We like to have products we know perform in the field in the real world before we spend money on residue trials.”

Through their research, Woodhall and Woods also found that irrigation methods play an important role in disease pressure. To investigate this, they used a large plot trial over a whole field as opposed to the small plot trials typically done in field work.

The work on the large plots was more representative and showed the potential difference irrigation type can have on disease development. Where in-furrow irrigation was used, *Cercospora* pressure was reduced by 35% compared with plots irrigated with overhead sprinklers.

Tilling soil and burying debris from the previous crop can reduce soil-borne *Cercospora* inoculum.

Woodhall and Woods are also working to develop a new diagnostic laboratory test for *Cercospora* in soil.

They have spore traps set out near an infected field to capture *Cercospora beticola* spores, which should help them establish a primer for a soil test. Currently, they must rely on plant tissue or culture to accurately test for the pathogen.

“We’re starting to get more recognition of the seriousness of this disease – 2022 and 2023, those are the worst years we’ve had in the state,” Woods said. ■



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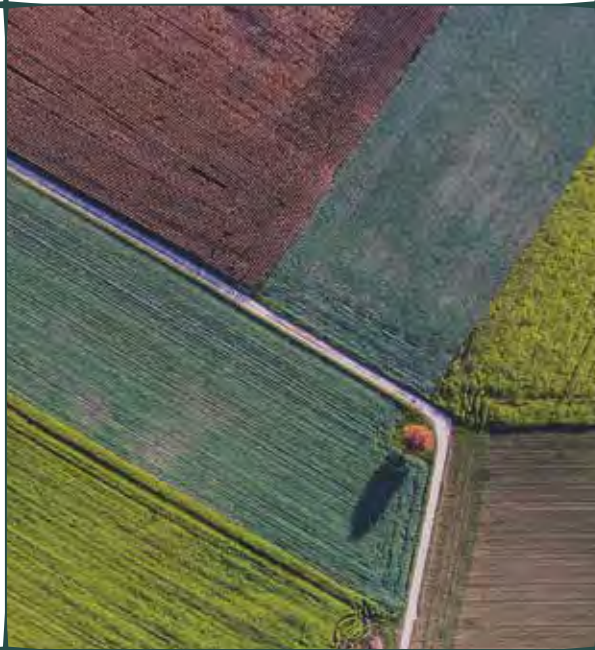


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Agricultural Profile

Madison County



Photo by Shaun Blaser

A lot of wheat, barley, potatoes and hay are grown in Madison County and corn silage is also a fast-growing crop in the county.

Madison County: wheat, barley, potatoes and hay

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

When it comes to crop farming, Madison County is mostly wheat, barley, potatoes and alfalfa hay.

However, more farmers here are starting to grow corn silage, which is used for the region's livestock sector.

"Corn silage has been gaining in popularity here," says Dwight Little, a Madison County farmer who grows alfalfa, wheat, barley and potatoes and also runs about 350 head of cattle. "A lot of people here are starting

to grow some corn silage for livestock."

According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, there were 46,132 acres of wheat grown in the county during the 2017 census year, 37,668 acres of barley, 33,021 acres of potatoes and 18,808 acres of forage crops, mostly hay.

There were also 13,738 cattle and calves in the county that year.

"If they have cows, they're doing

“We have, for the most part, good water rights and that good volcanic soil that we grow potatoes in. That makes this a real good area for growing spuds.”

- Shaun Blaser, Madison County Farmer

corn silage,” says Madison County farmer Shaun Blaser, who serves as the president of Madison County Farm Bureau. “There is getting to be more of that grown here for sure.”

Little says the county’s climate and water availability make it a great place to grow those four main crops but the region’s shorter growing season makes it so some of the other major crops grown in south-central and southwestern Idaho can’t be grown economically there.

There were 454 farms in Madison County during the ag census year and 196,046 acres of land in farming, most of it irrigated.

There is some dryland farming occurring in the county “but we’re probably at least 90 percent irrigated,” Blaser says.

He says the county is a good area to grow Idaho’s most iconic crop, potatoes.

“We have, for the most part, good water rights and that good volcanic soil that we grow potatoes in,” Blaser says. “That makes this a real good area for growing spuds.”



Photo by Dwight Little

Corn silage is a growing crop in Madison County, which is home to more than 13,000 cattle and calves.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, farmers and ranchers in Madison County brought in \$227 million in farm-gate revenue in 2022, \$211 million from crops and \$16 million from the livestock sector.

That \$227 million in farm revenue means Madison ranks No. 15 out of Idaho’s 44 counties in total farm revenue, despite its relatively small size.

Little, who serves on the Madison County Farm Bureau board of directors, says most of the county Farm Bureau’s budget goes toward helping youth.

“We’re really supportive of the youth in our county,” he says.

A lot of the county Farm Bureau’s budget is spent helping FFA and 4-H students

at the fair, says Blaser. The county has two FFA programs and “we support them whenever they ask for funding or need help,” he adds.

About two-thirds of the county Farm Bureau’s budget goes toward helping youth.

“The youth are the future of agriculture,” Blaser says.

A lot of kids involved with 4-H and FFA in the county do not come from farming backgrounds and Blaser says the local Farm Bureau organization feels it’s important to help them.

“They and their families see the importance of agriculture in our community,” he says. “If they’re willing to take the first step in agriculture, we in Farm Bureau feel it’s important for us to support them back.”

More and more housing units and subdivisions are appearing in the county but so far, the growth isn’t having a major impact on agriculture in Madison County, Little says.

“It’s not like other places of the state are experiencing, but it’s definitely happening in our area, too,” he says. ■



LEFT: Potatoes are harvested in a Madison County field. About 30,000 acres of spuds are grown in the county, which also produces a lot of wheat, barley and alfalfa hay. Photo by Jamie Little

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