

# Idaho Loses **144,000** Acres of Farmland



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## Sharing our farm stories well beyond our fencerows

**A**merican Farm Bureau recently joined with 51 other agriculture organizations and companies to showcase the Future of Farming on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

It's not every day that you see big farm equipment like tractors and combines just a few blocks from the Capitol. Talk about getting outside your fencerows!

This was a great opportunity to showcase how important agriculture is to our nation and to shine a spotlight on the hardworking

men and women who grow our food, fiber and renewable fuel.

At our Farm Bureau booth, we were joined by several of our grassroots members who gave their time to come and share their farm stories.

I firmly believe that there is nothing more powerful than sharing your personal experiences—whether that's in a lawmaker's office, at your local market, on social media, or on the National Mall.

See **DUVALL**, page 6

## The President's Desk

**By Bryan Searle**

President, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation



## What is the IFBF policy book?

**S**hortly after he was elected to Congress, Rep. Russ Fulcher, R-Idaho, told Idaho Farm Bureau Federation members that he kept two books in his desk during his time in the Idaho Legislature: the Bible and IFBF's policy book.

He continues to keep both in his desk.

He is not alone in that regard. Many if not most Idaho lawmakers hold the IFBF book in high regard.

There is great strength and power within our policy because it comes from grassroots

members throughout the state. The book is reviewed and debated in each County Farm Bureau each year.

Some policies are amended, some are deleted, and some new ones added.

Farm Bureau is the voice of agriculture and is the largest ag organization within the state and nation. Many elected officials and other leaders in the state look to the book for guidance when addressing agricultural issues.

See **SEARLE**, page 6

## Inside Farm Bureau

**By Zak Miller**

CEO, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation



## What is a potato?

**A**s a general farm organization, the Farm Bureau is tasked with defending and promoting all forms of agriculture and all legal agricultural products. We take great pride in our responsibility to represent all of you and your needs and we have an equally great appreciation for our many allies that we work alongside in advocating for agriculture.

A question that is often asked by active farmers and ranchers as well as the general citizen is: "What are you (Farm Bureau) doing

for me now, and what have you done on my behalf?"

When asked these or similar questions, it is easy to talk about property rights, excessive regulation, natural resource management, or even trade policy.

But on very special days, issues arise that are so important and so consequential that I want to shout from the rooftops that we (Farm Bureau) are protecting agriculture from annihilation.

See **MILLER**, page 7



## Idaho Farm Bureau.

Volume 28, Issue 4

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Photo by Sean Ellis

Last year was the third straight year that Idaho set a record for total value of agricultural exports. Idaho exports of live animals, mostly cows, were up 15 percent compared with 2022.

## Idaho set another record for ag export value in 2023

By Sean Ellis

*Idaho Farm Bureau Federation*

POCATELLO – Idaho set a record for total value of agricultural exports last year, even as total U.S. ag export value declined 10 percent from 2022.

According to U.S. Census Bureau data released in early February, \$1.18 billion worth of Idaho agricultural products were exported to other countries in 2023. That represents a 4 percent increase over the previous record of \$1.13 billion set in 2022.

Idaho has now set a record for total ag export value three years in a row according to the Census Bureau data.

The 2022 record eclipsed the 2021 total of \$1.02 billion, which tied a record set in 2014.

The Census Bureau data shows that total U.S. ag export value reached \$191 billion in 2023, which was a 10 percent decrease from the 2022 record.

The U.S. Census Bureau ag export value data is released monthly. A separate set of data released annually by USDA in the fall shows Idaho set ag export value records in 2020, 2021 and 2022.

The USDA data for 2023 will be released in early November.

The Census Bureau data is based on what state a commodity is exported from, so it doesn't capture all of Idaho farm product exports. For example, it wouldn't capture the wheat from Idaho that is exported out of Portland.

The USDA data, which shows Idaho sold \$2.89 billion worth of ag products in 2022, captures more of the state's farm exports but is not as timely as the Census Bureau data, which is released monthly.

However, both sets of data track closely when it comes to percentage increases and decreases.

See **EXPORTS**, page 13





Photo by Bill Schaefer

Gov. Brad Little addresses the 200 people that showed up Feb. 20 for a grand opening celebration of a new, \$12 million research laboratory at the University of Idaho's Parma Research and Extension Center.

## Parma research center celebrates \$12 million revival

By Sean Ellis

*Idaho Farm Bureau Federation*

PARMA – More than 200 people showed up Feb. 20 to celebrate a \$12 million revitalization of the University of Idaho's Parma Research and Extension Center.

The grand opening ceremony for a modern research facility at the center represented a sharp reversal in fortunes for the 200-acre research center that conducts research on many of the crops grown in the region, and Idaho, including vegetables, forages, cereals, hops, mint and fruit and seed crops.

In 2009, after U of I's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences lost nearly \$5 million in state funding for research efforts during the recession, the Parma center was slated for closure.

At one point, it was already closed on paper.

But the agriculture industry rallied around the Parma center and created a group called Treasure Valley Ag Coalition to save it. The TVAC group lobbied lawmakers and the governor on behalf of the research center.

Fifteen years later, not only is the research center still open, but it's thriving, with a modern, \$12 million facility that contains laboratory space for research in nematology, pomology, plant pathology, microbiology and hops.

The new 9,600-square-foot building replaces antiquated facilities that were more than 50 years old in some cases.

The Feb. 20 ceremony was a grand opening for the new facility.

"We are here. We are not shuttered," Margie Watson of J.C. Watson Co., an on-

ion packing and shipping company based in Parma, said during the grand opening ceremony. "I stand before you to not only celebrate this building, but to celebrate the vibrant future it represents to the University of Idaho, the Parma area and Idaho agriculture."

Watson and her husband, Jon, were members of the TVAC group that is credited with saving the Parma center.

"Fifteen years ago, February 2009, was a completely different story," Margie Watson said. "Parma was being shuttered. We couldn't have that. Industry couldn't have that. The state of Idaho couldn't have that. So industry went to work."

She said the group of ag industry members that would form TVAC initially met in a room at the center that had no heat or water.

"We worked hard; we opened our

checkbooks,” Watson said. “We formed the Treasure Valley Ag Coalition to save this station. We got ‘er done.”

The history of the Parma Research and Extension Center dates to 1922. The station has entomology, soils, horticulture, crop management, pomology, viticulture, nematology, and plant pathology programs.

“The actions of the Treasure Valley Ag Coalition are really the inspiration we built on to get us to the point that we’re not only celebrating the continued legacy of the Parma R&E Center, but a revitalization of the center and the grand opening of a new cutting-edge research laboratory that will pay dividends for generations,” said Michael Parrella, dean of U of I’s College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, which oversees the state’s nine agricultural research centers.

Parrella pointed out it was a three-way partnership between the state, the university and ag industry that resulted in the revival of the Parma center. The ag industry came up with \$3 million toward the new facility.

“I credit the investment from the state of Idaho and the many individuals, family

*“It’s real simple: healthy plants, healthy soil is critical to all of Idaho agriculture, not just the Treasure Valley. This facility is for Idaho.”*

*– Margie Watson,  
J.C. Watson Co.*



Photo by Sean Ellis

**Michael Parrella, dean of University of Idaho’s College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, discusses the opening of a new, \$12 million research facility at the U of I’s Parma Research and Extension Center, during a grand opening ceremony Feb. 20.**

farms, corporations and commodity organizations who gave to this effort,” Parrella said.

Gov. Brad Little, a rancher who used to have a farm near the Parma center, said Canyon County, where Parma is located, is the most diversified agricultural county in Idaho and one of the most diverse in the United States.

“Crops that are grown real close to here literally are the formation of agriculture and a lot of the wealth in Idaho,” Little said during the grand opening celebration. “The base that has kept Idaho going through the hard times is right here in this community.”

Little said he has constantly reminded fellow ranchers over the years that in agriculture, change is inevitable but adaptation and survival are optional.

“This facility right here is adaptation and survival,” he said. “This facility is going to give farm families and farm companies all over the nation, and particularly all

over the state of Idaho, the tools they need to be survivors and actually thrive in the face of all the challenges we in agriculture know exist every day.”

The new facility is called the Idaho Center for Plant and Soil Health. Margie Watson said the research done there benefits all of Idaho agriculture, not just the Treasure Valley area.

“What a fitting name for this facility,” she said. “It’s real simple: healthy plants, healthy soil is critical to all of Idaho agriculture, not just the Treasure Valley. This facility is for Idaho.”

“This facility has the capacity to house the most diverse list of crops for research in the Northwest,” Watson added. “This center has been the cornerstone of agriculture and research and education for a century. But like any living organism, growth depends on renewal. Let’s celebrate this renewal.” ■

*Continued from page 2*

When we as farmers and ranchers get outside our fencerows, it makes a difference. Why? Because people want to hear about agriculture straight from the men and women who have their hands in the soil every day.

What's more, the public overwhelmingly trusts you: our research shows that roughly 9 in 10 adults say they trust farmers and ranchers.

That's why for the 2024 Ag on the Mall event we invited several Farm Bureau members from across the country to meet with the thousands of visitors stopping by our nation's front lawn, so that more folks could learn about farming and how sustainability is "just what we do."

On the first day, we were joined by farmers from the West and East, Jon Dinsmore of Arizona and Jamie Tiralla of Maryland.

Jon, a fourth-generation lettuce, grain and hay farmer from Yuma, Ariz., shared about how leafy greens are grown in the winter.

Jon is no stranger to sharing his story since he's become known as the Green Screen Farmer on social media where he shares about life on the farm.

And Jamie Tiralla is no stranger to D.C. as she hails from Prince Frederick, Md., where she and her family raise cattle, goats, sheep and hogs and sell their meat at local farmers' markets and by appointment on their farm.

*'I can't help but be excited thinking about the tens of thousands of folks who learned something about how their food is grown, thanks to these grassroots ambassadors.'*

Jamie talked about animal care on the farm and how partnerships with local markets and chefs are critical to farms near urban areas.

On the second day, we welcomed farmers from the Midwest and Southern regions: Kamal Bell of North Carolina and Andrea Brossard of Wisconsin.

Kamal is a first-generation farmer and founder of Sankofa Farms in Durham, N.C. His goal is to create a sustainable food source for minorities in both rural and urban areas in the counties near his farm.

Kamal is also a beekeeper, and while he left the beehives back at home, he brought great stories to share with visitors about the importance of pollinators in agriculture.

Meanwhile, Andrea, a third-generation farmer from Beaver Dam, Wisc., shared about her family's Holstein herd on their dairy farm.

Andrea helped visitors understand animal nutrition and what sustainability looks like on a dairy.

I can't help but be excited thinking about the tens of thousands of folks who learned something about how their food is grown, thanks to these grassroots ambassadors.

Of course, this isn't the first time Jon, Jamie, Kamal, and Andrea have gotten outside their fencerows. Like so many of you, they are also active in their county and state Farm Bureaus.

They have put our leadership development training to work in helping them share their story and grow an understanding of farming through traditional and digital media, mentorship programs, and leadership roles across agriculture—just to name a few.

Let's keep up the good work of planting seeds and building trust with our friends, neighbors and leaders—near and far.

And if you're looking for resources to help you explore new ways to get outside your fencerows, I invite you to reach out to your local Farm Bureau and check out resources on Farm Bureau University.

We want to help you share your story. ■

## SEARLE

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*Continued from page 2*

IFBF includes 84,000 members, of which 10,000 are actively engaged in farming or ranching. Farmers and ranchers from around the state and nation are actively engaged each year in updating the policy book.

What they – you – believe on the issues matters to our leaders, as it should.

So, what is the IFBF Policy Book and why is it so important?

The book contains 57 pages addressing 166 different policies, on subjects from A to Z. It addresses a large number of issues important to our members; everything from water to wolves.

Alphabetically, some of the issues it addresses include: The Agriculture in the Classroom program, agricultural practices, cloud seeding, commodity diseases, commodity sales, dams, dust rules, invasive species, nematodes, predators, renewable fuels, the state's Right to Farm Act, sage grouse, seeds, the state budget, Idaho's tax code, trade, University of Idaho, veterinary students, wildfire, and zoning.

The process that begins the formulation of the policy book begins at the grassroots level, in county Farm Bureaus.

The various proposals start in a county Farm Bureau meeting; then if a proposal is passed at that level, it moves on to a district and then state or national level, where they are voted on by real



farmers and ranchers.

Each of these policy proposals is heavily vetted and debated before being voted on.

No policy makes it into the book by accident or without serious consideration.

Idaho leaders can be assured that when a policy is in the book, IFBF members will then promote and support it.

In December during our organization's annual meeting, voting delegates from each of the state's 37 county Farm Bureau organizations come together to debate and vote on proposed changes, additions or deletions to the policy book.

Proposed changes are adopted or rejected by majority vote. When voting is complete, Farm Bureau members rally around the policies adopted in the book and combine their efforts to defend and promote these ag issues through legislation or other opportunities.

IFBF's governmental affairs team, with support from volunteer Idaho Farm Bureau Federation members, works to accomplish that.

The more people that are involved in those efforts, the better the chances that those policies will be adopted by elected officials from the local to national levels of government.

Anyone who wants to get involved in the policy-making process on various issues should contact their local county Farm Bureau, which will help them get involved. (You can find that contact information at [Idahofb.org](http://Idahofb.org))

The voting delegates who ultimately accept or reject proposed policies are all farmers or ranchers who have a real stake in the industry.

The American Farm Bureau Federation policy book contains 259 pages addressing 567 policies.

The process for developing the AFBF book is like that for developing the IFBF book and starts at the grassroots level.

The national policy book, we should remember, is our policy book and is used every day while working on the many national issues.

Both can be reviewed online at IFBF's website – [idahofb.org](http://idahofb.org) – under the "Legislative" tab near the top of the page.

Remember, our elected leaders look to us for solid guidance on issues relating to the agricultural industry.

That is why it is so important that if you're not involved, you need to get involved today and have your voice heard so we can defend and promote agriculture. ■

## MILLER

*Continued from page 2*

Today, I am proud to say that a specific crisis seems to have been averted. We can all sleep easy because, and a big thanks to the National Potato Council for leading the way on this, POTATOES ARE STILL A VEGETABLE!

Thanks to the efforts of many advocacy groups and a letter signed by both Sens. Risch and Crapo of Idaho, USDA will not be changing the potato from a vegetable to a grain in the next Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

This is not a satire; it is real. As frustrating and comical as it sounds, the potato has been under attack for quite some time, and a change in its status could have far-reaching consequences for all of us, both as consumers and as the greatest potato producers in the world here in Idaho.

If potatoes were reclassified as grains, consumers might become confused and change their dietary habits. Low consumption of vegetables is already a critical problem in the United States.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that only one

*'The humble potato has always known what it is and has been a key source of nutrition to generations of Americans.'*

in ten American adults meet the recommended intake of vegetables.

Potatoes are a key source of vitamins, minerals, and fiber typical of vegetables. Classifying them as grains could lead to misconceptions about their nutritional value, possibly causing consumers to reduce their intake of potatoes in favor of other vegetables or, worse, equating potatoes with processed grains such as white bread and pasta, which lack comparable nutrient profiles.

The reclassification of potatoes as a grain would significantly impact school nutrition programs. Potatoes currently count toward required vegetable servings in school meals. If reclassified, schools would need to find alternative vegetables, posing challenges and potentially increasing costs.

Potatoes are a cost-effective and popular choice among students, providing essential nutrients. Reduced access to potatoes could negatively impact dietary quality and students' health.

The humble potato has always known what it is and has been a key source of nutrition to generations of Americans.

Changing the potato from a vegetable to a grain would not change the potato, but such actions if enacted could affect millions of Americans' health and access to our affordable spuds as well as create even more power by a few activists who believe they should dictate the meals you, your children, and neighbors should purchase and consume.

It is both a sad and glorious day when we can report that our famous potatoes are still staffed on the vegetable counter. (At least for now.) ■

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# 2024 IDAHO FARM BUREAU SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS

## Ag Winners



**Emysha Brune**  
Twin Falls County

**Received  
\$3,000**



**Larell Chandler**  
Washington County



**Kacie Clyde**  
Latah County



**Rachel Wandell**  
Ada County



**Brodee Wootan**  
Elmore County

## Non-Ag Winners

**Received  
\$2,000**



**Via Vachon**  
Bonner County



**Tannabe Cecil**  
Lost Rivers (Butte) County



**Elizabeth Michaelson**  
Bannock County



**Lucy Barney**  
Jefferson County



**Rylee Roberts**  
Washington County

**CONGRATULATIONS  
AND GOOD LUCK!**

 **Idaho**  
**Farm Bureau Federation.**



# *Idaho losing farmland at a rapid pace*

By Sean Ellis  
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

As more of Idaho's farmland is converted for development, more farmers find themselves having to "farm through the cracks."  
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation photo

**I**daho lost farmland, and farms, at an alarming rate from 2017 to 2022.

According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, 144,000 acres of working lands in Idaho were taken out of production during that five-year period.

Working lands include cropland, pasture and rangeland, and private forests.

That represents a 1.2 percent drop from the 11.69 million acres of total working lands in the state in 2017.

Nationwide, 20 million acres of land was taken out of production from 2017 to 2022, according to the ag census. That was a 2.2 percent drop from 900 million acres in 2017.

During that five-year period, 2,119 farms and ranches in Idaho went out of business, which amounts to more than one operation in the state closing every day during that time.

Nationally, the U.S. lost 142,000 farms from 2017 to 2022, according to the ag census.

Many or most of those shuttered farms, both in Idaho and nationally, were smaller farms and ranches and, percentage-wise, account for little of the state's and nation's overall farm production.

Idaho still has 22,877 farms and total production of the state's main agricultural commodities – potatoes, hay, milk, beef, wheat, barley, sugar beets, onions, hops, etc. – remains steady, if not increasing.

But the loss of agricultural operations and working lands from 2017 to 2022 is still not welcome news for the state's farm and ranch community and the rate of

that loss is on a bad trajectory, said Idaho Farm Bureau Federation President Bryan Searle.

"It's terribly sad news when any farm or ranch goes out of business, regardless of size," he said. "And the total loss of land in farming is troubling."

Given Idaho's rapid population growth, those numbers didn't come as a major shock to many people involved in the state's agricultural industry.

"It's not slowing down," said Canyon County farmer Sid Freeman, who took a drive recently along Cherry Lane from Canyon County to Ada County. "I had no idea where I was at. I had to look at the road signs to know where I was at. Things are moving extremely fast. I don't see it slowing down."

"The most disturbing thing to me is the loss of total acres in farming," said New Plymouth farmer Galen Lee. "A lot of that is good productive row crop land, too. Once those acres are developed, they don't ever go back into farm production."

Lee tried to buy some farm ground that he currently rents but the landowner got a better offer from a developer.

"With development all around you, it gets harder and harder and harder to keep farming," he said.

"I drive all over this state and I see the growth, so I'm not surprised by the ag census data," said David Anderson, the Idaho program manager for American Farmland Trust, which tracks the loss of working lands in the U.S.

"And it's not just development pressure, he added. "Idaho's working landowner families are shouldering





Development, like this one outside of Caldwell, is increasingly making it more difficult to farm in Idaho. Photo by Joel Benson

market, operational, regulatory, and succession pressures. The data tells us that it's the small and middle-sized operations that are giving up and selling. The current system is not working in their favor."

The value of land for urban development pushes out small farms close to town, said Twin Falls County Farm Bureau President Larry Hollifield. "You get more money selling it for houses versus selling it for farmland."

The rapid loss of farm ground "is shocking but as I look around, there is a lot of farm ground in this community being sold for housing," said Jefferson County Farm Bureau President Alan Clark.

He said there were a couple plots of farm ground he had hoped to buy but developers offered an amount that priced him out.

The developer offered more than three times what Clark could offer.

"There's no way we can compete with that," he said.

Anderson, who grew up working on his family's ranch in the Lemhi Valley, noted that AFT's Farms Under Threat: 2040 report estimates that more than 10 square miles of Idaho's farms and ranches are permanently converted to development each year, and with continued population growth, the pace is accelerating.

"When you look at this most recent ag census data, the loss of land in production suggests that a significant amount of that land is poised to be converted permanently," he said.

He said the recent data "reinforces the fact that we are at a point of runaway sprawl. That is an indication that the agricultural protections currently afforded in the state's Local Land Use Planning Act, we've outgrown them. They're not working for us anymore."

"The challenge we have is that once we're in a runaway sprawl state, then we are changing the land value economics in the path of the growth so quickly that a lot of our working landowners don't necessarily have the resources to be able to withstand the development pressure that's coming at them," he added. "I think the overall challenge we're facing is operation viability. It is easier for landowners in the path of growth to cash out rather than shoulder in and say, 'I'm going to set this up for the next generation. I want to keep farming. My kids want to keep farming.'"

Anderson said there are possible solutions to stop or at least stem the rate of farm and farmland loss in Idaho. It's just a matter of having the will to do what it takes to make a difference.



# *“When it comes to having robust farms and ranches, there are a couple of resources that are irreplaceable – land and water.”*

*– Brad Jensen, IFBF Director of Governmental Affairs*

“It’s going to take a big toolbox because it’s not a one-size-fits-all answer,” he said. “Every farm, every ranch, is uniquely its own. So we’ve got to be able to meet our working landowners halfway with a toolbox and say, ‘You want to stay in operation and your kids want to come home and take over. OK, I think this tool, this tool and this tool are what’s going to work best for you to do that.’”

Any solutions will have to respect private property rights, he said, a train of thought that lines up with Idaho Farm Bureau Federation policy.

“A farmer should be able to sell his land to the highest bidder,” said Freeman. “Private property rights should never be taken away from any individual.”

That said, he added, land comes with a specific land use and citizens can make sure county commissioners follow their county’s comprehensive plan to try to avoid fragmentation of highly productive farm and ranch country with housing subdivisions.

Clark said there has to be some way of stemming the loss of farmland without violating private property rights.

“I definitely believe in property rights. It is your property and you can do with it as you like,” he said. “But people need to understand, that’s where our food comes from.”

He would like to see more targeted growth, away from the most productive farmland.

The hot spots for farmland loss in the state are the Treasure Valley of southwestern Idaho, the Twin Falls area in

southcentral Idaho, the Panhandle area in northern Idaho, and the Idaho Falls to Teton corridor in eastern Idaho.

The good news, Anderson said, is that more people in the state are beginning to understand what is happening and the stakes involved.

“There are a lot more people in Idaho, especially elected officials and decision-makers, that are now looking at this data and understanding what it means,” he said. “The conversation around protecting our agricultural economy is being elevated. More people are realizing that, ‘OK, we’re at a tipping point.’ It’s no longer, ‘Oh, let’s just kick that down the road anymore.’”

A farmland preservation bill supported by IFBF was passed by the Idaho Legislature this year. It allows for the creation of Agricultural Protection Areas.

An APA is a voluntary land-use design-

nation that is requested by a landowner of their county commissioners. The landowner receives certain non-monetary benefits or incentives that protect the viability of the operation.

There is the possibility of financial incentives being added to the APA at some point in the future if lawmakers agree to that.

More than two years ago, IFBF voting delegates, who are all farmers or ranchers, adopted a policy supporting state legislation to protect agricultural lands if it is voluntary and incentive based.

That led to the creation of a farmland preservation committee that created and endorsed the APA concept.

The APA bill is just the start of addressing the issue, Searle said.

“Finding ways to stem the rapid loss of farmland that is occurring in some parts of the state is one of Idaho Farm Bureau Federation’s highest priorities,” he said.

IFBF Director of Governmental Affairs Braden Jensen said it was good to see the wide support for the APA bill in the legislature.

“It is important that our policy makers continue to prioritize the needs of the ag industry,” he said. “When it comes to having robust farms and ranches, there are a couple of resources that are irreplaceable – land and water.” ■



**RIGHT: A hay field is cut right next to Interstate 84 and a nearby subdivision in this Idaho Farm Bureau Federation file photo.**



*Continued from page 3*

The recent Census Bureau data shows that \$383 million worth of ag products from Idaho were sold to Canada in 2023 – a 6 percent increase over 2022 – making that nation the top destination for Idaho ag products.

Mexico was second at \$246 million, which was a 47 percent increase over 2022. China ranked No. 3 (\$108 million, 14 percent decrease), followed by Japan (\$69 million, 12 percent increase) and South Korea (\$52 million, 35 percent decrease).

Idaho's top ag export to China last year was whey and the total value of whey exports from Idaho to China in 2023 reached \$35 million, which was a 43 percent decline compared with 2022. This was in part due to reduced demand for feed whey from China's struggling pig sector, according to the U.S. Dairy Export Council.

Dairy ranked as the state's top agricultural export last year at \$255 million, but that represented an 18 percent decrease compared with 2022.

According to the U.S. Dairy Export Council, total U.S. dairy export value in 2023 was down 16 percent from the record year of 2022. Both U.S. dairy export value and volume decreased in 2023.

Some of the main factors in the decrease of U.S. dairy exports, according to USDEC, included elevated inflation, disappointing economic growth in key export markets, particularly China, and increased milk output from the European Union and New Zealand, which are the U.S. dairy industry's two main export competitors.

Idaho in 2023 sold \$155 million worth of prepared vegetables, a category that includes French fries. That was a 74 percent increase in that category vs. 2022.

Idaho exports of oil seed products totaled \$123 million in 2023, a 2 percent increase over 2022, and Idaho exports of edible vegetables, a category that includes fresh potatoes, rose 1 percent to \$120 million.

Idaho exports of a category that includes malt totaled \$113 million in 2023, which was a 39 percent increase vs. 2022. This category includes malt produced from barley that is used in the beer-brewing process. Most of Idaho's malt is sold to Mexico.

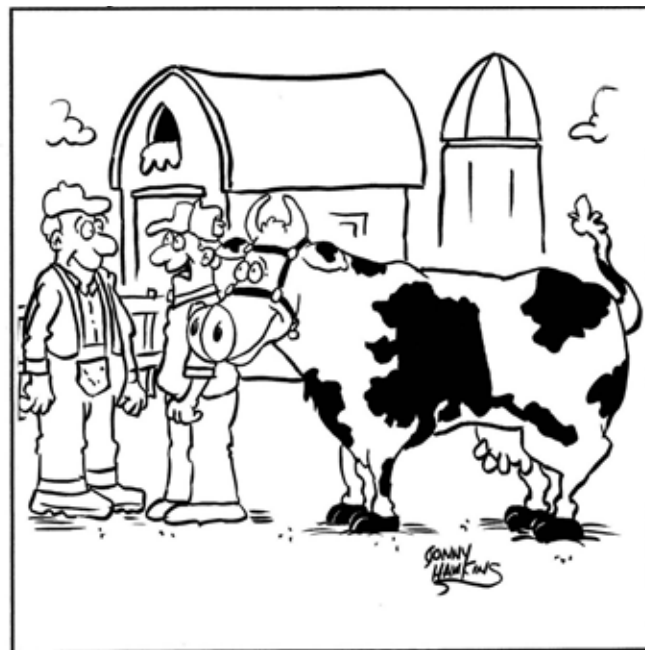
Idaho sales of live animals hit another record in 2023 at \$94 million, which was a 15 percent increase compared with 2022. Most of those animals were cows sold to Canada. ■

## Country Chuckles

**By Jonny Hawkins**



"Tell me about this bleating disorder."



"I've always had a strange desire to go to Alaska."

# A billion feet of timber: The importance of Idaho's forests and forestry industry

By Lt. Gov. Scott Bedke

The Gem State is home to more than 21 million acres of dense and plentiful forests, covering roughly 41% of the state. Our forests provide watersheds for drinking water and habitat for wildlife.

Many of us spend our free time there – hiking, ATV riding, camping, hunting, skiing, or simply enjoying Idaho's outdoors. But our forests provide much more – Idaho's forestry industry is vital to our very way of life.

Wood is the most basic component of homes, furniture, musical instruments, books, pencils, even toilet paper!

The importance of this natural resource cannot be overstated, which is why the sustainability of our forests needs to be a top priority for the state of Idaho, for both the longevity of our timber supply and the availability of quality jobs.

Let's let the numbers speak for themselves. The latest data available from 2021 shows that Idaho's forest industry harvested more than one billion feet of timber, generating \$2.5 billion in lumber-related products.

This economic impact is irreplaceable. Lumber production provides thousands of jobs, from loggers and mill workers to arborists and truck drivers.

In fact, for each million board feet of timber harvested in Idaho, more than 30 jobs are provided. That equates to more than 30,500 job opportunities statewide, careers that support Idahoans and their families.

Our Idaho economy relies heavily on our forests, which is why their overall preservation is also key. Sustainable harvesting, including selective logging, reforestation, and habitat preservation, upholds a delicate social contract between industry and society.

After each year's harvest, new trees are planted for the future. This commitment



ABOVE: The Gem State is home to more than 21 million acres of dense and plentiful forests, covering roughly 41% of the state. Stock photo  
RIGHT: Idaho Lt. Governor Scott Bedke. Submitted photo

demonstrates how responsible resource management can and will ensure that future generations are set up for success.

So, what are the steps we can take to further protect this vital industry? The new Idaho LAUNCH program is one helpful step. High school seniors can apply for a grant of up to \$8,000 to use toward Idaho post-secondary education for an in-demand career.

This means interested students can use LAUNCH to help them study for a degree or learn a trade that is needed in Idaho's forest products sector. A true win-win for both future forestry professionals and the Gem State.

Idaho is known for its abundant forests. Using these natural resources requires walking a fine line between responsible use and exploitation.

Idaho is actively working to ensure we never cross that line. Our forest industry



is simply too important for our state, our citizens, our country, and our very way of life.

The best thing we can all do right now is make sure our lumber producers have the right tools, guidelines, and candidates to guarantee the continued success of the forestry industry.

Let us support the hard-working men and women who cultivate these important resources so we all can reap the benefits well into the future. ■



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# PRIVATE CROP INSURANCE THAT BREAKS NEW GROUND.

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# Tater Tot festival planned for August

By Bill Schaefer  
*For Idaho Farm Bureau Federation*

In an effort to remind the world of the role members of his family played in the development of Tater Tots, Les Grigg has been traveling across the state of Idaho with a sheet of plywood with one-inch holes drilled in it.

The plywood artifact represents a replica of what is known in the history of Tater Tots as the Holey Board.

More than 70 years ago, three men – F. Nephi “Neef” Grigg, his brother, Golden T. Grigg, and Ross Erin Butler – were looking to develop a culinary use for the potato waste remaining after producing French fries at their Ore-Ida processing plant in Ontario, Ore.

Through trial and error, the three men created a pulpy mash that was then pushed through a plywood board with one-inch holes drilled in it that came to be called the Holey Board.

This pulpy mash was deep-fried, creating the stubby potato side dish with a crunchy exterior that the world has known as Tater Tots since 1953.

Since then, Ore-Ida was purchased by the Kraft Heinz company in 1965 and in 2022 the J.R. Simplot Co. reached a multi-year agreement with Kraft Heinz to be the exclusive manufacturer and supplier of Ore-Ida, including Tater Tots.

Today the Holey Board can be found in a glass case on a wall at the Ontario facility.

Adopting the phrase, “Protect Your Tots,” Les Grigg and his cousin, Steve Grigg, this year founded the F. Nephi & Golden Grigg Legacy Foundation to remind the world of the role members of their family shared in the development of the Tater Tot and to raise money for a new domestic violence and sexual assault and child abuse center in Idaho Falls.

Les Grigg has been traveling across Idaho with a replica of the Holey Board to promote the inaugural Greater Tater Tot Festival scheduled for Aug. 16-17 at Sandy Downs in Idaho Falls.

He is teaming up with the Greater Idaho Falls Chamber of Commerce (GIFCC) to promote the festival, which is free and will run from 5-9:30 p.m. on Aug. 16 and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Aug. 17.

Michelle Covert, finance director for the GIFCC, said the chamber was looking for a summer event to celebrate the important role of agriculture in Eastern Idaho and when Les Grigg walked in to her office with the Holey Board, the chamber saw the synergistic potential to recognize agriculture and possibly raise awareness of domestic violence and child abuse.

“We were looking as a chamber to do a greater Idaho Falls event which would basically involve the whole area that the Greater Idaho Falls Chamber serves, which is Idaho Falls, Ammon, Iona and Ucon,” Covert said.



Photo by Bill Schaefer

**Les Grigg holds a replica of the Holey Board at his booth during this year's Idaho Potato Conference at Idaho State University. The original was used in the development of Tater Tots.**

“We just really wanted to put together an event for the community that was going to be a fun day of activities,” she said.

This being the inaugural event, Covert said she's unsure of crowd size but would like to see anywhere from 5,000 to 10,000 in attendance over the two-day festival.

“We're really hoping for a great success this year that will turn this into something that happens every year,” she said.

Les Grigg said they plan on having a ticketed, fundraising dinner with a silent auction on Aug. 16.

Live music, food trucks, and vendors are planned for both days, along with a variety of children's activities, including an obstacle course.

For more information about the Greater Tater Tot Festival or if you're interested in participating, contact Michelle Covert at (208) 523-1010, Ext. 4, or at [finance@idahofallschamber.com](mailto:finance@idahofallschamber.com) or Les Grigg at [griggatertot@gmail.com](mailto:griggatertot@gmail.com) or (208) 589-0065. ■

# Crop insurance 101: the basics

*For nearly 100 years, the history of the farm bill largely tracks the history of food production in the United States as the legislation has evolved to meet the needs of farmers and consumers alike. Agriculture's role in providing food security, and in turn national security, to the United States is more important than ever. And now, work on the next farm bill continues during a period of volatility on every front – political, economic, environmental and beyond.*

**By Daniel Munch**  
AFBF Economist

Crop insurance is exactly like it sounds: an insurance product designed to help shield farmers against a myriad of potential risks, ranging from adverse growing conditions to market fluctuations.

This coverage fills crucial gaps that private insurance products may neglect or find impossible to address alone. Supported by the federal government, these policies provide financial stability for farmers, who can tailor coverage to suit their unique operational needs from a variety of policy options.

Products are available for annual crops, perennial tree crops and livestock and may protect against the value of the commodity, the replacement value of a damaged or destroyed commodity, or the operating margin for a commodity.

## Background & funding

Crop insurance has its roots as part of the policy response to the Great Depression and was permanently authorized under the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 and the Federal Crop Insurance Act of 1980.

The Federal Crop Insurance Corporation is the agency that finances the program's functions through mandatory appropriations of "sums as necessary."

The Risk Management Agency (RMA) has discretion over policy offerings, coverage and administration.

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projects net spending each year and estimates the costs of supporting a portion of a farmers' policy premium, compensating private insurers for their administrative and operating expenses and reinsuring losses from policies sold (transferring all or part of the risk to another insurer).

Projections depend partly on commodity prices. If commodity prices increase in the future, the expected value of insured crops would rise, leading to higher anticipated values for insured liability and premium discounts compared to scenarios with lower commodity prices.

For marketing year 2024, the CBO projects a total program cost of \$12.37 billion.

Title XI of the farm bill supports new and continued insurance products farmers may purchase through a public-private partnership.

Private-sector companies known as approved insurance pro-



Idaho Farm Bureau Federation photo

viders (AIPs) sell and service crop insurance policies while USDA plays critical roles in financing, regulating and reinsuring the policies.

This model is essential to service farmers and ranchers and the uniqueness of each of their operations across the country as AIPs provide the boots-on-the-ground service and processing, relieving USDA of administrative burdens.

Farmers work with their local crop insurance agent to select the base coverage policy that fits their farm or ranch. Additional products, or endorsements (similar to options for automobile or home insurance products), can be added to underlying policies for additional costs.

## Covered perils

Crop insurance provides protection for a limited number of events or conditions. These are called "covered perils" or "causes of loss" and include adverse weather conditions (e.g., hail, frost, drought, flooding); failure of irrigation water supply (if caused by an insured peril during the period of insurance coverage); fire (due to natural causes); plant diseases (provided the farmer followed guidance on proper application of disease control measures); and insect and wildlife damage (provided the farmer followed guidance on proper application of pest and wildlife control measures).

Certain policies also insure against losses from market price declines. Crop insurance does not cover damage or loss of production due to the inability to market a crop for any reason other than actual physical damage for an insurable cause of loss.

## Selecting a crop insurance product

Farmers have the flexibility to customize their crop insurance to align with their farm management objectives and practices. In many cases farmers can choose to insure based on a farm's average



## FEDERAL CROP INSURANCE PRODUCTS – AN OVERVIEW

| Yield Protection  | Revenue Protection   | Livestock Risk Protection & Gross Margin  | Actual Production History  | Area Risk Protection  | Rainfall Index  |
|---|--|---|--|---|---|
| Multi-peril policy that insures against yield losses due to natural disaster. Uses the spring price to determine coverage levels. | Multi-peril policy that insures both yield loss and changes between the harvest price and the spring price | Financial protection against price or margin erosion.   | Multi-peril policy that insures against yield loss by covering future yields based on past yields. | County-based policy that insures against widespread loss of revenue caused by low prices, low yields or both.                         | Insurance policy to protect livestock feeders against loss of pasture, rangeland or forage due to drought. Uses NOAA rainfall data. |
| Margin Protection   | Enhanced Coverage Options (ECO)  | Whole Farm Revenue Protection   | Dairy Revenue Protection (DRP)   | Dollar Plans  | Others  |
| Area-based, underlying policy that covers unexpected decreases in operating margins for corn, rice, soybeans and wheat.           | Policy that offers additional area-based coverage for a portion of the underlying policy up to 90% or 95%. | Tailored insurance plan to provide coverage for all commodities of a farm under one insurance policy. | Allows dairy producers to purchase protection against declines in milk prices.                     | Multi-peril policy type that uses cost of establishing a crop (reference maximum dollar amount). Often used for specialty tree crops. | RMA regularly adds new policies and coverage options. Policies can often be combined and catered to specific operations.            |



American Farm Bureau Federation

Source: USDA RMA

yield, its average crop revenue, the county's average yield or the county's average revenue.

Revenue protection is usually more expensive due to the higher level of risk associated with market fluctuations. Using farm-level averages is also more expensive than using county options because of the smaller risk pool.

To begin, farmers must first select the level of coverage they want to purchase.

The coverage level refers to the percentage of commodity value that is covered — referred to as the liability — and the corresponding loss that a farmer must incur before an indemnity payment will be made (comparable to a deductible for home or auto insurance).

A coverage level of 80%, for example, would insure losses greater than 20% of the liability but provide no protection for losses less than 20% of the liability.

The lower the coverage level, the more extreme the losses have to be to trigger an indemnity, which lowers the associated risk of a plan. For this reason, farmers pay a higher cost for higher coverage levels.

A CAT plan, known as catastrophic coverage, represents the minimum available coverage level and only makes indemnity payments (payouts from a triggered crop insurance plan) when a farmer loses 50% or more of their expected yields.

Farmers participating in crop insurance are required to follow USDA's guidance on good farm practices while planting, growing and harvesting their crops. This reduces risk to the program related to operator-caused crop losses.

These practices vary by area but can include actions taken before planting (properly preparing a field), during the growth

period (properly watering crops) and during harvest (following harvesting procedures that minimize crop losses).

Failure to comply with these practices can disqualify a farmer from crop insurance. Certain operation characteristics (such as whether acreage is irrigated or not) can change the level of risk exposure farmers have regarding good farm practices and with it the cost of a policy.

Federal crop insurance adjusts for differences in land and crop ownership through five types of insured units: basic, optional, enterprise, multicounty enterprise and whole farm.

As noted by the Congressional Research Service, basic units are all the insurable acreage in a county that's either owned or cash rented and planted to one crop.

Optional units subdivide a basic unit by geographic boundaries and allow farmers to tailor their crop insurance coverage for differences in growing conditions within the basic unit.

Enterprise units include all the insurable acreage for a crop in a county, regardless of whether the land is owned or rented by the farm operator. Multi-county enterprise units are enterprise units that include all the insurable acreage in two contiguous counties.

Lastly, whole farm units must include all crops grown and all land insured for the farm, regardless of county boundaries.

### Premium support

USDA's administrative burdens for the program are reduced by providing payments to AIPs to distribute, rather than the agency directly working with hundreds of thousands of crop insurance policy holders.

AIPs receive payments from USDA on behalf of farmers to offset a portion of premium costs. For most acreage policies discount

| Table 1: Crop Insurance Premium Discount Rate          |      |                |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
|--|------|----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Government-Paid Portion, Percent of Total Premium; CRS |      | Coverage Level |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Unit Type  | CAT  | 50%            | 55% | 60% | 65% | 70% | 75% | 80% | 85% |
| Basic or Optional                                      | 100% | 67%            | 64% | 64% | 59% | 59% | 55% | 48% | 38% |
| Enterprise or Multicounty Enterprise                   | N/A  | 80%            | 80% | 80% | 80% | 80% | 77% | 68% | 53% |
| Area plan (yield)                                      | N/A  | N/A            | N/A | N/A | N/A | 59% | 59% | 55% | 55% |
| Area plan (revenue)                                    | N/A  | N/A            | N/A | N/A | N/A | 59% | 55% | 55% | 49% |
| Whole farm   | N/A  | 80%            | 80% | 80% | 80% | 80% | 80% | 71% | 56% |

rates (the portion of a crop insurance premium paid for by the government) are set by statute set in the farm bill and may vary based on the coverage level a farmer selects.

USDA pays 100% of the premium rate for CAT coverage levels at 50% coverage, then the levels of support decrease as selected coverage levels increase (table 1).

Beginning and veteran farmers are entitled to a 10% discount rate above the amounts listed.

In addition to premiums, farmers also pay administrative fees. For CAT coverage, farmers pay \$655 per crop per county with no discount. For policies with higher coverage levels, the administrative fee is \$30 per crop per county in addition to the farmer-paid premium.

Crop insurance policies are priced in a way that must be “actuarially fair” and USDA is statutorily required to operate in ways that “improve the actuarial soundness of federal multiperil crop insurance coverage.”

This means the total value of premiums paid over many years should be about equal to the value of indemnity payments distributed.

One way USDA measures success is through a financial performance indicator known as a loss ratio defined as the indemnities paid divided by the premiums collected for policies in a given year.

A loss ratio of one means indemnities equaled premiums, while a loss ratio greater than one means indemnities were higher than premiums and the opposite for a loss ratio lower than one.

As of March 2024, the loss ratio for 2023 policies is 0.86, meaning that more premiums were paid for policies than indemnities paid for losses incurred.

### Creating new insurance policies

The Federal Crop Insurance Corpora-

tion (FCIC) board of directors manages the federal crop insurance program and must approve new crop insurance policies and can do so through a process known as 508(h) submissions.

New policies can be submitted by RMA or from nongovernment actors including AIPs, colleges and universities, cooperatives, trade associations and even individuals.

External experts review concept proposals and full 508(h) submissions prior to consideration for adoption by the FCIC board of directors.

When considering new 508(h) proposals, the FCIC board of directors must consider the interests of agricultural producers and the potential for “significant adverse impact on the crop insurance delivery system” (i.e., keeping crop insurance actuarially sound).

The 508(h) proposal must also provide coverage that is likely to be “viable and marketable,” address “a clear and identifiable flaw or problem in an existing policy” or provide coverage for a commodity that either could not be covered or had low participation under the existing coverage.

Costs of preparing 508(h) proposals can be reimbursed by USDA if the FCIC board of directors adopts the proposal, incentivizing thoughtful and innovative submissions.

From 2000 to 2023 the number of policies sold has increased from 1.94 million to 2.34 million.

### Conservation compliance requirements

To encourage the conservation of wetlands and highly erodible lands, the Federal Crop Insurance Program requires participants to meet conservation compliance requirements.

To comply, farmers must agree to maintain a minimum level of conservation on highly erodible lands and not convert

wetlands to crop production. The 2014 farm bill included a provision that could eliminate crop insurance support for producers who are out of compliance with conservation requirements.

The 2018 farm bill introduced new specifications that qualified certain voluntary uses of cover crops as a type of good farming practice – allowing land planted with cover crops to maintain crop insurance eligibility.

Cutoff dates that applied to prevent plant acres in 2019 and 2020 were also adjusted as they may have deterred farmers from applying cover crops to prevent plant acres.

### Summary

Crop insurance remains a crucial safeguard for farmers, tracing back to the Great Depression and evolving into a vital tool amidst today's market and weather volatility.

Supported by a partnership among the federal government, private insurers and farmers, it offers tailored protection against diverse risks for farmers across the nation.

Farmers bear a significant part of the cost themselves, and ongoing innovation in policy offerings allows more and more farmers to shield themselves from unexpected losses, bolstering the resiliency of the food system.

Provisions that keep program costs in check and promote good farm practices optimize the return on investment for taxpayers.

As the U.S. navigates an increasingly uncertain future, improving crop insurance through passage of a new five-year farm bill is essential for safeguarding the livelihoods of farmers, the stability of rural economies and the reliability of our food system. ■



# Winter wheat virus gaining foothold in northern Idaho

By John O'Connell  
*University of Idaho*

MOSCOW, Idaho -- A tough-to-manage disease affecting winter wheat that was confirmed for the first time in the state last spring has recently surfaced in several more northern Idaho fields, according to two University of Idaho crop experts.

Kurt Schroeder, UI Extension cropping systems agronomist, and Doug Finkelnburg, UI Extension educator of cropping systems, alerted farmers and agronomists last spring that a couple of fields in Nez Perce County were infected with soilborne wheat mosaic virus (SBWMV).

The disease, which spreads via tainted soil and can significantly reduce yields within infected patches, was found this spring in additional fields in Nez Perce County, as well as four Idaho County fields.

"Those four fields in Idaho County are not contiguous. There is some distance between them," Finkelnburg said. "We suspect it's very likely there are additional fields we haven't discovered yet."

SBWMV was first found in the central plains of the U.S. in 1919 and arrived in Oregon's Willamette Valley in 1994. In 2005, the disease was confirmed in Oregon's Columbia Basin, and it arrived in Walla Walla County, Wash., in 2009.

Schroeder and Finkelnburg sought to raise awareness among their region's growers and fieldmen about SBWMV symptoms and how to respond to confirmed infections during field days, cereal schools and other industry forums throughout last season.

The virus replicates in cool, wet conditions, often infecting crops in the fall when temperatures drop below 60 degrees.

SBWMV is easily confused with other common problems affecting cereals, such as barley yellow dwarf virus, excessive moisture and nitrogen deficiency.

Upon emerging from dormancy, infected patches appear light-green or yellow and their growth remains stunted for a while compared with surrounding healthy plants.

The patches can appear to recover as temperatures warm, but plants still suffer yield losses. Laboratory testing is needed to confirm the disease.

"There is a high probability because it's so easily confused with other common problems that this has gone unnoticed for some time, and once we had a positive detection last year and we did a concerted education effort to describe the symptoms and get the word out, I believe we had some success in education and outreach and people started to look for it specifically," Finkelnburg said.

Schroeder has been sending samples from infected plants to researchers at the UI Parma Research and Extension Center as they seek to expand testing capabilities at their diagnostics laboratory to include SBWMV.

"I think our efforts are going to be to continue educating grow-



Photo by Doug F.

**A field in northern Idaho shows symptoms of soilborne wheat mosaic virus. The disease was first discovered in Idaho last season and has surfaced in several more fields this season.**

ers as we move into our field days this year," Schroeder said.

SBWMV is vectored and transmitted by a soilborne fungus-like protozoan, *Polymyxa graminis*, which is a parasite of plant roots.

"Once it gets into the soil it can persist indefinitely on whatever plant happens to be in the field, and when you have a susceptible host like winter wheat, the virus is transmitted into the plant," Schroeder said. "While crops other than winter wheat are not hosts for SBWMV, you can't rotate crops to manage the disease."

The best management practices for limiting the spread of SBWMV are sanitizing farm equipment and planting resistant winter wheat varieties.

In highly infected fields, it may be wise to plant a blend of resistant varieties and high-yielding, locally adapted varieties. Fumigation could be a management option, though it isn't cost-effective in wheat production.

The list of SBWMV-resistant winter wheat varieties adapted to northern Idaho conditions is limited. University researchers may thoroughly evaluate germplasm for additional sources of resistance.

"We are just going to have to learn to live with a new virus like they have in Washington and Oregon," Finkelnburg said. "They haven't quit farming wheat because it showed up. They just farm a little differently." ■

# Excitement growing for University of Idaho's Deep Soil Ecotron

By Sean Ellis

*Idaho Farm Bureau Federation*

MOSCOW, Idaho – A \$25 million project on the University of Idaho campus that will allow scientists to conduct studies on one of the last research frontiers – deep soil – is getting closer to completion.

Construction of the facility that will house the U of I's Deep Soil Ecotron is well underway and, when completed – it's expected to be operational in 2026 – researchers will use it to explore deep soil research.

U of I researchers were super excited when it was announced three years ago that a \$19 million National Science Foundation grant was awarded for the project, said Zachary Kayler, an assistant professor of soil and water systems and co-director of the project.

Now, as the facility is being built and the actual research part of the project is nearing, there is a new wave of excitement, he added.

"This is the second level of excitement," he said. "We're getting excited about the research."

Most soil research currently involves the first foot or so of soil. The U of I's Deep Soil Ecotron will allow scientists to conduct soil research at depths up to 10 feet.

Scientists currently know next to nothing about deep soil, Kayler said.

"There are important things we need to learn," he said. "We will find interesting things for farmers."

There is a lot of biomass beyond the top 30 centimeters of soil that researchers know very little about, said Michael Strickland, an associate professor of microbial ecology and project co-director.

"We want to understand this," he said. "We don't have a clear understanding of it. No one's really done the research."

The Deep Soil Ecotron will contain up to 24 "eco-units" which will be huge columns used to study soil cores taken from around the state, and they will include above-ground

**LEFT: Work on University of Idaho's \$25 million Deep Soil Ecotron, which will be housed on the university's Moscow campus, is well underway and the project is expected to go operational in 2026.**  
Submitted photos





plants and below-ground organisms such as insects and microbes.

Each unit will hold eight tons of soil and researchers will be able to control a range of variables inside the units, from temperature to water to exposure to carbon dioxide.

The focus on soil health has exploded in recent years, said Michael Parrella, dean of U of I's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.

He said scientists basically know more about life on the ocean floor than they do about deep soil.

Deep soil research "is a brave new world and this is the only place that you will be able to do that type of research," he said. "Soil is not a dead structure. It's a living community. Understanding what a healthy soil is (can) contribute to crop productivity."

The exciting thing for farmers when it comes to the Ecotron is that it could enable researchers to discover ways to improve soil health and ultimately increase yields, said Strickland.

Project leaders are currently asking stakeholders, including farmers and agribusinesses, what type of research they would like to have conducted at the Ecotron.

The research could include things like studies on nutrient management, water use efficiency, how fire and drought affect soil, and strategies to help store carbon and keep soil healthy.

It could also shed more light on what's happening with the arthropod community deep in the soil.

Parrella said the studies conducted at the Ecotron will improve understanding of how deep soil organisms react to certain conditions, how soil systems respond to agricultural practices and how well they sequester carbon.

For farmers, he said, the goal is that research done at the facility will enable them to minimize inputs and maximize yields and profits.

There are only 13 Ecotron facilities in the world and most are located in Europe. None go close to the soil depths that the U of I project will explore.

While it will be housed on the U of I's Moscow campus, the Ecotron will have



**The University of Idaho's \$25 million Deep Soil Ecotron will include 24 of these "eco-units" that will hold eight tons of soil each and be used to conduct research on deep soil properties.**

multiple collaborators, including scientists from several universities. One of the project's goals is to create a national network of scientists who will conduct experiments at the facility.

That network and type of work being conducted there will elevate the profile of the University of Idaho, said Parrella.

As a university, "You want the best fac-

ulty. You want the best graduate students," Parrella said. "Where are they going to go? They are going to go where there are exciting things happening, where there are unique facilities, where there are great researchers doing work that can guide and mentor them, and where they have a facility where you can't do the work anywhere else in the United States except there." ■





# Thinning for the Health of Your Forest, Part 1

By Randy Brooks  
University of Idaho

I like to teach my students that all trees (indeed, all plants) need three things to live and grow: water, sunlight, and nutrients (collectively considered resources).

Barring additional inputs such as fertilizer or water, an acre of land only has so many resources to produce a certain amount of wood. As a forest grows, trees compete above ground for sunlight (photosynthesis) and below ground for water and nutrients.

Trees that are stronger competitors will outgrow weaker, less competitive trees and the stronger trees will begin to occupy the growing space, and thus capture more resources.

The stronger competitors eventually become dominant and co-dominant trees, while the weaker trees fall behind in growth and become intermediate and suppressed trees.

Less competitive trees become stressed, leading to in-



# *‘Of all the silvicultural treatments that exist in a forester’s toolbox, thinning might be one of the most beneficial.’*

creased susceptibility to insects and diseases, and may die if they cannot capture enough resources. At this point, a forester or landowner tending the stand should reach into their management toolbox for solutions.

Of all the silvicultural treatments that exist in a forester’s toolbox, thinning might be one of the most beneficial.

Forest thinning reduces stand density by removing individual or groups of trees in a stand to create new growing space for residual trees. By decreasing stand density, tree-to-tree competition is reduced, canopies of residual trees increase, and these trees grow larger in diameter and increase merchantable timber.

Thinning can also create a forest more resistant to drought, forest insect/disease attacks, and threats from fire. Thinning can remove defective trees, decrease rotation length, help conserve site productivity, and control stand structure, composition, and density.

Reducing stand density is an important aspect of thinning. It is common on sites with too many trees per acre. For perspective, we typically plant no more than 400 trees per acre, but many naturally regenerated stands may have way more than that.

In some areas, natural regeneration can also quickly establish following planting, creating undesirable species composition. If naturally regenerated or planted stands with prolific natural regeneration are left untreated, competition becomes severe, leading to stagnant growth.

Poor competitors begin to die due to competition and insects, and fuel loads increase, which increases chances of catastrophic wildfires.

Thinning can also allow the forest manager the ability to select or adjust for stand species composition, especially in a naturally regenerated stand.

The first step to any thinning effort is to assess stand density. One of the most common questions about thinning is how widely to space the trees. Density can be described as trees per acre, basal area, or density relative to the maximum SDI.

This was covered by Chris Schnepf in another article in this publication, so I won’t discuss it here.

A thinning may be precommercial or commercial. Commercial thinning removes trees large enough to be taken to a mill and produce a net-income.

Precommercial thinning, often referred to as PCT, focuses on cutting smaller trees and is carried out as an investment, in which the cost of the thinning exceeds any income from the cut.

## **Precommercial thinning**

Precommercial thinnings are conducted to improve the stand in terms of tree health, growth rate, or stand structure for the future. PCTs are made early in the life of a stand, between 10 and 20 years old, depending on the initial density of the trees and how rapidly they are growing.

The term “PCT” does not necessarily mean the primary objective is managing for ultimate commercial harvest. You might be managing primarily for other objectives, including wildlife, aesthetics, recreation, or other values and still do some PCT - the term simply refers to the size of trees being cut.

PCT is one method to control species composition in a stand besides planting. Natural regeneration frequently occurs but may not be the desired species or the ratio of undesirable species to desirable species may be too high.

Even if you plant the ideal species, additional trees may seed in from nearby trees (ingrowth) that may change your species composition.

Ingrown species may not be a problem if they are desired for the site. But naturally seeded trees can be problematic if they aren’t suited to the site long-term, if they suppress the desired species for the site, or if they create stands less resistant to insects, diseases, or fire.

For example, sites that have been harvested and re-planted due to root disease issues may have Douglas-fir and grand fir in the surrounding forest that seed into a plantation.

These will likely be killed by root diseases, but not before suppressing species which are ultimately more resilient to root diseases. PCT is an excellent opportunity for early course correction.

Timing of PCT varies by species and initial stand density. There is some value in letting trees compete briefly to identify which trees are exhibiting the best growth potential.

But a good rule of thumb is to thin before the average crown ratios drop below 40%. The crown ratio is the portion of a tree’s height that has green branches. If a tree is 10-feet-tall tree and the top seven feet has green branches, that tree would have a 70% crown ratio.

Crown ratio estimates should be measured on trees inside of the stand and not trees next to a road or meadow – those trees will have larger crown ratios than the interior trees due to light received from openings.

Stands with small or poorly developed crowns and long, slender stems may be prone to windthrow or breakage from heavy wind or snowstorms, so it’s important to thin before this state is reached.

If a stand already has very small crown ratios, it might be possible to conduct light thinning in periodic stages to build larger crowns and root systems and develop more stem taper so trees can withstand greater exposure to weather hazards.

In closing, precommercial thinning is a great tool we have in our toolbox. Stay tuned for the next edition where I’ll cover commercial thinning. ■

*Randy Brooks is a University of Idaho Extension forestry specialist. He can be reached at [rbrooks@uidaho.edu](mailto:rbrooks@uidaho.edu).*

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# Walk on the wild side wearing a custom-made Wild Rag

By Kathy Neville

*For Idaho Farm Bureau Federation*

An assortment of Wild Rags made by Kathy Bell. Submitted photo

**K**athy Bell's Wild Rags are, well, just wild.

For nearly 35 years, Bell, of Darlington, has sewn Wild Rags in every color and pattern imaginable, from paisley's, to florals, to stripes and plaids.

There's an assortment of Western designs like the one with fancy silver spurs and conchos on a deep red background, and lots and lots of wild animal prints, which are especially popular, she said.

"When it comes to Wild Rags, the sky's the only limit," Bell said.

Wild Rags, typically worn by cowboys and cowgirls, have lots of different names, according to the National Ranching Heritage Center at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas.

Depending on the region, they're called cowboy scarves, bandanas or kerchiefs, in addition to Wild Rags.

Wild Rags originated in the mid-1800s. Back then, the first Wild Rags were often fashioned by cowboys themselves from flour sacks, which back in the day were large, high-quality, cotton bags left over after all the flour they held was used up, according to the NRHC website.

Then there's how a Wild Rag is worn. Here too, the style varies among individu-

als, but they're usually folded into a triangle, rolled and wrapped around the neck.

They're secured with a square knot in the front or with a scarf slide. They can also be draped loosely over the chest and tied in the back.

A deceptively simple piece of cowboy gear, the website says, Wild Rags are most often used to keep out winter's chill. They can be worn over the nose to keep out dust, or in an emergency, they can even be used as a bandage, a tourniquet, or a sling.

They have even been used as an impro-

vised lead rope for a horse or a dog leash.

Wild Rags can be worn all year round, even during the summer, to wipe away sweat, or dampened with water and worn, which has a cooling effect on the body.

Wild Rags are typically large and square-shaped and made out of a variety of fabrics. Cotton, silk, or even fine wool are most often used. Since silk and wool need regular dry cleaning, and cotton requires a bit of ironing, Bell makes her Wild Rags from wash-and-wear Charmeuse Satin.

The fabric is lightweight, smooth, super



RIGHT: An example of a young cowboy wearing a bandana, or Wild Rag. Stock photo





Kathy Bell in her sewing room.

Submitted photo

soft, kind of flowy and durable since it's made from 100 percent polyester, according to mytextilefabric.com.

Bell made her very first Wild Rag when her daughter Teena married Chris Lord, a local cowboy.

"Teena picked peach as her accent color, so I made peach-colored Wild Rags for Chris and all his groomsmen," Bell said. "Chris thought peach was too feminine so after the wedding he gave it back to me. I still have it and I still wear it. They never wear out."

After the wedding, one thing led to another and people started asking Bell to make Wild Rags for them. One of her first Wild Rag fans was her grandson Dallyn, who would help himself to her Wild Rags in her sewing room.

"He told me recently he has about 30 Wild Rags, but his wife says he has about 60," Bell said.

Bell sews and sells Wild Rags upon request, but many of her Wild Rags are marketed through The King Mountain Supply in Moore.

The store was previously a farm and ranch supply store called The Lost River Cooperative that was popular among locals.

"It's ridiculous. I keep thinking I'll saturate this market and they won't sell any more, but my Wild Rags keep getting more and more popular," she said. "They sell very well here in the valley because it's very cold here. People buy them for Christmas, Easter and Valentine's Day gifts. One customer bought 15-16 Wild Rags

*"I keep thinking I'll saturate this market and they won't sell any more, but my Wild Rags keep getting more and more popular."*

for Christmas gifts but for the most part ranchers buy them. But who knows, maybe they'll get popular with those who drive side-by-sides or ride motorbikes, which is also a popular activity around here. They're versatile enough for any use."

The King Mountain Supply typically carries about 25 or so of her Wild Rags and when they need to restock, they pick up the phone and call Bell, who lives nearby. She keeps about 50 Wild Rags on hand at home. Her Wild Rags are 48 inches in size but she'll custom- make practically any size a customer wants.

The special requests she gets are usually for Wild Rags that measure 54 inches or 36 inches.

"Over the years, Wild Rags have gotten bigger and bigger; sometimes people will even ask for one that's 54-inches square. The larger sizes seem to be what cowboys like," she said.

High school rodeo kids like her Wild Rags because it's usually really cold during their rodeo season, which starts in early spring.

And she's filled large orders from the Upper Valley Junior Rodeo Association, a new start-up association for kids in East Idaho, created by DeeDee Tucker, Megan Elkington and Becky Crapo.

They suggested Wild Rags to the board to give as awards the kids could put to use right away.

"Kathy's Wild Rags were a perfect fit. Wild Rags have always been part of my life growing up; my dad never went anywhere on our ranch without his Wild Rag, and Kathy made every single one he owns," Crapo said. "I've continued that tradition and worn them myself, and my husband and our girls wear them. They're very reasonably priced and of excellent quality, which is rare these days. The quality is second to none."

While the wilder patterns and larger sizes are appealing, Bell and her husband Preston stick with the solid colors.

"The first Wild Rags I made were all in solid colors. Most older men still like the solid colors," she said. "I'd say 10 percent of my customers prefer solids, while 90 percent of my customers are younger guys who like the wilder patterns and colors."

Like everything, prices have been on the upside, but her Wild Rags are still reasonably priced at \$30 for a large Wild Rag or \$20 for a smaller one. She charges a fee for postage but will split the cost of shipping on large orders.

To pick out your own Wild Rag, stop by King Mountain Supply in Moore. You can also email Bell at [kbell@atcnet](mailto:kbell@atcnet) or call her at (208) 554-2272. ■



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Photos by Sean Ellis

University of Idaho is heightening its focus on Idaho water.

# U of I heightening focus on water

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

MOSCOW, Idaho – University of Idaho is stepping up its research and outreach efforts to help maximize the use of one of the state's most precious natural resources – its water supply.

The College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALS) has made some recent hires to bolster its team of water experts and is seeking to fill additional positions to help address critical issues in the water-constrained West.

Idaho has 3.4 million acres of irrigated cropland, and 86% of water withdrawn in the state is used for agricultural purposes.

The state legislature and Gov. Brad Little recently authorized the college to hire an irrigation Extension specialist, who will be based in southern Idaho.

"The state is the third largest irrigator in the nation right after California and Texas," said Robert Heinse, acting head of the

Department of Soil and Water Systems. "An irrigation specialist is important in a state like this."

The position will educate growers, fieldmen and students on the design and function of sustainable, data-driven irrigation and water management systems and practices. The search will begin soon.

The college's previous extension irrigation specialist, Howard Neibling, who retired in March 2022, helped innovate an irrigation system known as low elevation sprinkler application, which uses hoses on pivots to dangle spray nozzles beneath the crop canopy, thereby reducing water drift and evaporation.

"The expectation is whoever gets hired in this position will continue efforts to work toward irrigation efficiency and water-use efficiency and be the connector of what research can do and technology can do in terms of variable application rates and relay the information to the growers out there," Heinse said.

CALS has hired Meetpal Kukal, an assistant professor of



agricultural and biological engineering with Penn State University, as a new water modeler within the Department of Soil and Water Systems.

Kukal will be based in Boise and will start work in August, filling the position vacated when Richard Allen retired in 2022.

Allen did groundbreaking research in the use of satellite remote sensing to quantify evapotranspiration from crops. He also incorporated remote-sensing data into modeling, which provided a tool to aid the Idaho Department of Water Resources (IDWR) in water budgets and groundwater modeling.

“Before Dr. Richard Allen’s retirement, his research group at the University of Idaho Kimberly Research and Extension Center collaborated with IDWR for many years to innovate state-of-the-art methods for quantifying evapotranspiration,” said Phil Blankenau, an evapotranspiration analyst with IDWR. “The university’s newly hired assistant professor, Dr. Meetpal Kukal, brings expertise in agricultural evapotranspiration and evapotranspiration measurement techniques. Dr. Kukal will be a valuable resource for IDWR.”

Heinse believes the addition of Kukal and the future irrigation specialist will elevate the university’s standing as a major contributor of water and irrigation science, bringing it closer to U of I President Scott Green’s goal of establishing U of I as the “University of Water.”

“The expectation is these two positions will work together and there’s going to be synergies between the Extension irrigation piece and the research irrigation piece,” Heinse said.

CALS has also hired Christa Howarth as a new assistant Extension water educator based in Boise. Howarth, who earned a master’s degree in environmental science through U of I’s McCall Outdoor Science School, started on March 4.

Howarth will teach Project Wet, which is a program that trains teachers to incorporate lessons in water into their curriculum.

Howarth will also facilitate the IDAH2O Master Water Stewards program, which tasks volunteers with monitoring water quality of streams and ponds.

The position will be funded for the first



**The waterfall along the River Walk in downtown Idaho Falls.**

year with part of a \$650,000 National Science Foundation Accelerator grant, awarded jointly to Boise State University and U of I.

Howarth aims to start a Treasure Valley version of the Confluence Project, which is a northern Idaho program that has high school students study water quality in the field with experts.

“As part of the grant we are actively interviewing stakeholders and end users in order to understand water education needs in the Treasure Valley so we can tailor my Extension position toward meeting those needs,” Howarth said.

U of I is also searching for a new director for its Idaho Water Resources Research Institute, which is among the nation’s 54 water research and technology centers.

IWRRI conducts and directs research in support of the water needs of the state, region and nation.

Jim Ekins, area water Extension educator based in Coeur d’Alene, is working on a project that should expand the influence of U of I’s new water personnel.

Ekins serves on the leadership team of the Western Water Network, which is being developed by the Western Association of Agricultural Experiment Directors to help institutions share water expertise and collaborate on projects.

“We are trying to develop a network of experts realizing there are very few water educators in Extension and there’s a great

need for research and extension related to water,” Ekins said.

“We are going to try to leverage our resources related to water.”

To some degree, most CALS initiatives involve using the state’s water resources as efficiently as possible.

For example, water conservation and water delivery are central themes of both the Innovative Agriculture and Marketing Partnership, which is a \$55 million grant CALS researchers received from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to study climate-smart agricultural production practices, and in the soil health demonstration farm, which is part of the Idaho Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment (Idaho CAFE).

Idaho CAFE, based in Rupert, will include the nation’s largest research dairy, and the demonstration farm will facilitate studies on the relationship between application of dairy nutrients and soil health and water quality.

Furthermore, the university-run Aquaculture Research Institute, which has facilities in Moscow and Hagerman, promotes science benefiting native fish populations, and maintaining adequate river flows and water quality is central in that mission.

“We’re a player in water at many levels,” said CALS Dean Michael Parrella. “Eventually, everything revolves around water and water-use efficiency.” ■

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Josh Nelson, Troy FFA

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Kuna FFA

### **Floriculture**

American Falls FFA

### **Horse Evaluation**

Troy FFA (pictured, left)

### **Parliamentary Procedure**

Fruitland FFA

### **Poultry Evaluation**

Preston FFA

### **Prepared Public Speaking**

Abigail Zelinka, Hagerman FFA

### **Spanish Creed Speaking**

Kerlyn Mendez, American Falls FFA

### **National Chapter Award**

American Falls FFA, Bonners Ferry FFA, Cambridge FFA, Hansen FFA, Highland-Craigmont FFA, Madison FFA, Mackay FFA, Meridian FFA, Rigby FFA, Troy FFA

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Kuna FFA

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### **Agricultural Education**

Samantha Smith, Moscow FFA

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### **Agricultural Sales**

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