

Is Hemp Viable in Idaho?



**Barley yield
contest, 3**

**New ag
program, 4**

**Stripe rust,
16**



Moving toward clarity on WOTUS

Farmers and ranchers are committed to stewarding the land and protecting the water we depend on. We know firsthand the importance of clean water: it's essential to our livelihoods and instrumental in providing a safe and abundant food supply.

That's why clarity with water regulations is critical and why we're glad to see the Environmental Protection Agency take the first step in providing a clear Waters of the United States rule.

Understanding Clean Water Act & WOTUS

Farmers have been caught in a regulatory tug of war around WOTUS for years. It seems that a new rule comes with every administration or changing of hands, leaving our farmers in a constant state of limbo trying to understand and comply with new guidelines.

Farm families shouldn't be left guessing or needing a team of lawyers and consultants to help them know what is and what isn't regulated on their land.

See **DUVALL**, page 6

The President's Desk

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



Some facts about agriculture

Where do you go to get your facts about agriculture? What do you believe or not believe about the ag industry? What is true or untrue?

In today's age, you can type just about anything into a search engine and find any "facts" you want, depending on how you frame the question.

Seeing something on the internet doesn't automatically mean it's correct. It can be hard to determine the truth about certain things in today's world.

Here are a few facts you might not know about major agriculture issues. Perhaps you have heard and maybe even believed some falsehoods regarding these issues.

Farm bill

Did you know that almost 80 percent of the funding in the farm bill goes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or what was formerly referred to as food stamps?

Most of the farm bill is not spent on actual

See **SEARLE**, page 6

Inside Farm Bureau

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



This is what we do

Growing up on a farm, five simple words shaped my entire childhood. "This is what we do" was my family's universal answer to nearly every question I asked.

Why were we moving cattle in sub-zero temperatures the day after Thanksgiving? Why did we have to get up early to pedal our bicycles to move sprinkler pipe? Why was I regularly abandoned in the forest with nothing but instructions to "keep the cows on the road" as my mother disappeared into the trees?

These were just a few of the many times my

siblings and I found ourselves asking why.

The answer never varied: "This is what we do."

Working alongside farmers and ranchers as an adult, I've come to realize my upbringing wasn't unique. Every farm family has their own version of this phrase — a mantra that explains when, why, and how the work gets done, regardless of convenience or comfort.

Some might say such an upbringing creates tough kids and resilient adults. Others might

See **MILLER**, page 7



Idaho Farm Bureau.

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Submitted photo

Barley Yield Contest winners gather with contest sponsors at the 2025 University of Idaho Cereal School in Fort Hall Feb. 5.

Idaho holds first-ever Barley Yield Contest

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

BOISE – Idaho’s first-ever Barley Yield Contest is being hailed as a successful launch, and the Idaho Barley Commission, which held the contest in 2024, plans to make it a national competition this year.

“The first year of the barley yield contest has been a positive and exciting start, with strong participation and valuable insights gained, but we recognize that there is significant potential for growth,” said Sydney Anderson, the IBC’s program manager for the yield contest.

For one, organizers hope to see more entries from across Idaho as well from other major barley-growing states “to further enrich the competition and highlight the diversity of growing conditions and best practices,” Anderson said.

“As with any new initiative, there are certainly areas that need fine-tuning,” she added. “We’ve gathered a lot of helpful feedback, and we’re focused on refining the contest to make it as beneficial to growers as possible.”

Idaho typically leads the nation in total barley production, and Idaho farmers produced 39 percent of the total U.S. supply of barley in 2024. Most Idaho barley is used in the beer-production process, while some is grown as human food and some is used as animal feed.

During the inaugural contest in 2024, Joey Wallace with Driscoll Bros. Farms in Jerome won the title for the highest yield with 241 bushels an acre. That was achieved with a winter variety: Utah10201.

COVER: A hemp field in Howe is harvested last year. See page 8 for a story on how hemp is faring in Idaho. Submitted photo

See **BARLEY**, page 11



Submitted photos

The Valley Agriculture Education Foundation formed in 2024 to restart the ag program at Valley High School, shown here, along with the district's middle and elementary schools, which are housed in the same building.

Valley School District restarting ag program

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

HAZELTON – Valley School District is creating a new agriculture education program for its students. It just needs a little more help.

The district covers the eastern end of Jerome County, in the Eden and Hazelton area.

It is located in the agriculture-rich Magic Valley of southcentral Idaho and is one of the only school districts in that region without an ag program.

VSD secured a \$3.3 million Idaho Career Ready Students grant and is working to raise the remaining \$500,000 it needs to fund a state-of-the-art ag education building.

The Valley Agriculture Education Foundation will hold a fundraising dinner and live auction April 11 to try to raise the funds that are still needed for the ag education building.

The district has one high school – Valley High School – which has about 200 students, and the ag education program will also be open to middle school students.

Katy Starr, communications and marketing director for VAEF, said the new ag education program and building will help ensure that middle and high school students in the Eden and Hazelton communities gain the skills, knowledge and hands-on training necessary to thrive in Idaho's agricultural sector.

“This isn't just about building a facility; it's about investing in the future of agriculture and creating opportunities for students to develop real-world skills,” said VAEF Chairwoman Krista Huettig. “With the support of our community, we can shape and provide opportunities to the next generation of farmers, ranchers, and ag leaders.”

Jerome County Farm Bureau has donated \$10,000 toward the new building project, and president Amy Mitchell said the organization realizes projects such as this will not only benefit students, but the region's and state's agriculture community as well.

“This project has the opportunity to give students some critical training so in the future, hopefully they can come back to our community and work in the agricultural sector,” said Mitchell, who raises beef cattle near Jerome.

The new building will feature modern shop and classroom

spaces designed to equip students with real-world, hands-on agricultural experience, Starr said.

The April 11 fundraising event – “Cultivating Legacy – Growing for Generations” – will take place at the Canyon Crest event center in Twin Falls, beginning at 6 p.m.

VAEF, a non-profit organization formed in 2024 for the purpose of bringing the Valley School District ag program and building project to life, is inviting the valley’s leading agriculture businesses, farmers and ranchers and other community supporters to take part in the fundraiser.

That event will feature dinner, live and silent auctions and, according to Starr, “the opportunity to invest in the future of Idaho agriculture by helping fund this critical educational initiative.”

Idaho rancher and social media influencer Jessie Jarvis will emcee the event, and Jack Riggs will serve as the auctioneer.

For ticket information, sponsorship opportunities or to donate auction items, contact VAEF at valleyagedfoundation@gmail.com or visit the Valley Agriculture Education Foundation Facebook page.

For more information, contact Krista Huettig at (208) 751-9510.

The Valley School District’s original ag program was discontinued in the 1990s for various reasons and Starr said community supporters have been working in recent years to restart it. However, limited classroom space and the need for a shop have posed challenges, she said.

Valley School District has been one of the only districts in the region without an

“By training students in these areas early, we’re building a pipeline of future professionals who will stay in our communities, contribute to local businesses, and help sustain Idaho agriculture for generations to come.”

— Katy Starr, VAEF

agriculture program, despite being surrounded by farming and ranching operations that drive the local economy.

A recent University of Idaho study by Jerome County Extension educator Steven Hines found that the agriculture industry is responsible for 59 percent of total sales and 42 percent of the jobs in the Magic Valley.

That study – “Contributions of Agribusiness to the Magic Valley Economy” – also found the industry is responsible for 48 percent of the valley’s gross regional product, which represents the total value of goods and services.

“The vibrant economy of the Magic Valley is driven by agribusiness, which includes on-farm production, ag processing and the ag services that directly support

agriculture,” the report’s executive summary states.

“With this new program and facility, students will gain hands-on experience in livestock management, crop science, ag mechanics, and business operations, giving them the skills they need to pursue careers in agriculture and ag-related industries,” Starr said.

The impact will go far beyond the students, she added.

“This program is an investment in the future of our local ag industry,” Starr said.

She said farmers, ranchers, and ag businesses across the Magic Valley are facing an aging workforce and a growing need for skilled, knowledgeable employees, whether in farming, veterinary services, agribusiness, irrigation, banking, or processing.

“By training students in these areas early, we’re building a pipeline of future professionals who will stay in our communities, contribute to local businesses, and help sustain Idaho agriculture for generations to come,” Starr said. “When students see career opportunities in their own community, they are more likely to stay, work, and raise families here in the Magic Valley, helping sustain the long-term vitality of our local economy.” ■



LEFT: VAEF is planning to re-open the ag program at Valley High School, shown here. The school district’s original ag program was discontinued in the 1990s.

Continued from page 2

Imagine planting a field, one you have worked for years, without knowing whether you risk facing a steep fine or even jail time, but that's been the reality for farmers for years.

Farmers are committed to doing the right thing and keeping our natural resources safe.

But these unclear and constantly shifting rules have created unnecessary obstacles, threatened progress and added confusion to working the land many of us have stewarded for decades.

The need for clarity

In recent years, the WOTUS rule has only gotten muddier. The 2023 rule set vague guidelines to expand the EPA and the Army Corps of Engineer's authority far beyond what Congress intended.

These vague rules attempted to regulate areas that become wet only in response to precipitation, along with any feature that could be viewed as having a "significant nexus" or direct connection to WOTUS.

Only a few months after this rule was finalized, we saw a landmark victory with the Supreme Court's unanimous decision in Sackett v. EPA to reign in the regulatory overreach of the "significant nexus" test.

But in response to that court decision, the EPA and Corps still failed to provide needed clarity. Instead, they reasserted vague and subjective standards, leading to even more permitting delays, litigation and uncertainty.

The road ahead

Farm Bureau has long advocated for consistent and fair guidelines that uphold the Clean Water Act without overextending federal authority. That's why we were encouraged to see EPA listen to the concerns of farmers and take the first step this month toward crafting a straightforward WOTUS rule that provides farmers the certainty they need.

This progress is a direct result of our Farm Bureau members stepping up and calling for clear rules.

We now must remain engaged with the EPA, Army Corps and Congress to finally achieve new rules that reflect the realities of life on the farm and allow farmers to continue growing the food America's families rely on.

The work on WOTUS still has a long way to go, but this is a step in the right direction, and Farm Bureau will press forward until clarity becomes a reality. ■

Continued from page 2

farm programs. However, the farm bill does provide a minimum safety net to help farmers and ranchers try to survive during tough times.

Right now, much of the nation's agricultural industry is facing one of those tough times.

With input costs remaining high and farm-level commodity prices on the decline, many of this nation's farmers are up against it right now and facing significant financial challenges.

In the midst of this trying time in farm country, the U.S. ag industry is living under an outdated farm bill that does not reflect current economic reality and commodity prices.

Congress typically reauthorizes the farm bill every five years to make sure its provisions and tools keep up with the times. However, the 2018 farm bill is now expired and has been extended twice.

Congress kicking the can down the road

'Fewer Americans are growing up on the farm and it is becoming increasingly difficult to find American workers interested in doing farm work.'

on a new farm bill – one that reflects current economic realities – is not acceptable.

Farm country desperately needs a new, updated farm bill. There are few pieces of legislation more important to this nation and we as an industry call on Congress to urgently address this matter immediately.

The farm bill is meant to ensure every American can put food on their family's table. At the same time, it does help give a little bit of assistance to struggling farmers and ranchers to be able to hopefully stay in business so there is food to be put on the table.

It is more accurately a food and farm bill.

It includes risk management tools for farmers, conservation programs and investments in agricultural research and is a critical tool to help ensure this nation's food supply remains secure.

We desperately need a modernized farm bill to protect our nation's agricultural industry, as well as our land, and ensure every American has access to a secure and affordable supply of food.

So you ask, why hasn't a new farm bill been passed? Because of what I consider to be a failure of Congress working together to get legislation passed.

Labor

Let's pivot to another very important issue the agricultural industry faces: labor.

Did you know that in every state in the nation, labor is the No. 1 concern for farmers and ranchers? America's farmers rely on a skilled, reliable labor force to produce our nation's food supply.

However, many farmers are finding it increasingly difficult to find enough labor.

There is a shortage of ag laborers and has been for years, to the point that some labor-intensive crops have been left in the fields because there is no available labor to harvest them.

Fewer Americans are growing up on the farm and it is becoming increasingly difficult to find American workers interested in doing farm work. There is a major shortage of workers willing to do these types of jobs here in the U.S.

Let me be clear: Farm Bureau supports a secure border. But we as a nation also need to reform our foreign guestworker visa program so that farmers can obtain the labor they need.

Yes, the United States does have a foreign agricultural guestworker temporary visa program known as the H-2A program.

However, that temporary visa program is

cumbersome and expensive to use because of several factors, including an unreasonable mandated wage rate.

This mandated minimum wage rate increases every year at an unreasonable rate. It's also one of just many costs that farmers who use the program face.

Some of those costs to use the program include: farmers who use the program also have to provide H-2A workers transportation to and from their home, as well as living quarters that have to pass inspection. There are many other fees and costs associated with the program.

Together, these costs make the program very expensive to use and many farmers simply can't afford it.

Also, there is no year-round guestworker program and certain ag businesses need year-round labor. This has been the case for decades despite efforts being made every day to get a year-round program in

place, with no success.

We applaud a secure border but we also need a gate whereby workers can legally come through to do the much-needed jobs here. We need Congress to urgently pass responsible farm labor legislation that addresses this labor issue for our agricultural industry.

If this issue is not addressed, we as a nation might end up having to import most of our food and leave our own farmers and ranchers out of business. Nobody wants that.

Once again, you might ask where the fault lies for this problem, and I say it lies with Congress failing to work together to pass the necessary legislation.

Food security is a national security issue and Farm Bureau continues to work night and day on these two important issues: the farm bill and labor. ■

MILLER

Continued from page 2

argue it plants seeds of trauma and underlying psychological issues. Having absolutely zero medical training myself, I suspect both are probably true.

It simply takes a different type of person to farm and ranch.

Unfortunately, we rarely associate government officials with this kind of dedication. Instead, we often assume public servants operate under the opposing principle: "This is what we don't do."

An experience last month challenged that assumption. The Idaho Farm Bureau hosted an evening event in Sugar City — a wonderful gathering with excellent presenters, dedicated volunteers, and delicious food.

If I dare let my bias show, most of our Farm Bureau events are pretty great. But there was something extra that presented itself that night.

As I entered the venue, I spotted Idaho State Department of Agriculture Director Chanel Tewalt and Deputy Director Lloyd Knight sitting in the audience. They had driven four-and-a-half hours from Boise to attend a Farm Bureau event in Sugar City on a Friday night.

Who does that?

I was thrilled but concerned. We engage with the ISDA often, so

it is not uncommon to have them as guests at Farm Bureau events. Had they misunderstood the importance of this particular event?

Why such a significant sacrifice to their schedules? (Especially when Director Tewalt had 4-H show lamb commitments at home the very next morning.)

When I voiced my concern, Director Tewalt's response echoed those familiar words from my childhood. She reminded me that her job is to be where agriculture is and to serve.

For those who've met Chanel, you know this isn't lip service — she genuinely seeks to serve Idaho's agricultural community.

Government is complex, regulations are difficult, and challenges inevitably arise. As much as I admire Director Tewalt and Deputy Knight, there are times when the Farm Bureau disagrees

with and challenges the ISDA.

We all have roles and responsibilities. Working together is enjoyable when we're aligned and challenging when we're not, and there will always be times when we disagree.

But working with people who genuinely seek to serve and support Idaho's farmers and ranchers through good and bad days is a blessing. Idaho is the envy of the nation to have civil servants who genuinely care about their customers: YOU!

Because for some, like Chanel Tewalt, serving isn't just a job description — it's what they do. ■

'Working with people who genuinely seek to serve and support Idaho's farmers and ranchers through good and bad days is a blessing.'

Idaho farmers are starting to figure out hemp



By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

BOISE – Since it first became legal to produce hemp in Idaho, in 2022, acres have more than doubled each year, from 459 in 2022 to 1,274 in 2023 to 2,668 in 2024.

That's not exactly an explosion of acreage but it does show that the crop has gained a small foothold in Idaho and some farmers are starting to figure out the agronomics and economics of growing hemp.

“We've successfully demonstrated that Idaho is an ideal state for growing industrial hemp,” said Roberts hemp grower Triston Sponseller, who also owns Idaho Hemp Processing in Rexburg. “Industrial hemp fiber has a massive potential in Idaho.”

He said the state “has both an ideal climate and soil structure” for growing hemp. “We see it as a very viable crop; just as viable as ... any other crop we grow here in Idaho. We're excited about it.”

Idaho farmers each year grow far more acres of some other crops, including potatoes (about 300,000 acres per year), barley (about 540,000), wheat (1.2 million), hay (1.2 million), corn (350,000) and sugar beets (170,000).

For now, hemp can be considered a burgeoning crop in Idaho, but there are a handful of farmers and processors that are starting to figure it out.

Many of them were part of a special hemp presentation before the House Agricultural Affairs Committee Feb. 6.

Braden Jensen, director of governmental affairs for Idaho Farm Bureau Federation, described the presentation to lawmakers as an informational update on the state's hemp industry.

Industrial hemp products have always been sold legally in the United States but not until the 2018 farm bill was passed was it legal to grow and process hemp commercially in the U.S.

LEFT TOP: Tristan Sponseller stands in his hemp field in Roberts in this file photo. Submitted photo; **LEFT: A freshly cut hemp field is shown in this photo taken near Howe.** Submitted photo; **BACKGROUND: Hemp grows in an experimental plot for evaluating weed-control products at the University of Idaho's Aberdeen Research and Extension Center in southeast Idaho.** Photo by Bill Schaefer

“It took a while for us to figure out what would work, but we did it an Idaho way that I think has threaded the needle to make sure that we have a very strong stance when it comes to our (state drug) policy.”

— Braden Jensen, IFBF

The hemp products sold in the U.S. previously came from other countries.

While the farm bill made it legal to produce industrial hemp, the federal government left it up to individual states to approve their own hemp plans that adhered to federal guidelines.

According to experts, it is impossible to get high from industrial hemp.

It took several attempts before Idaho legislators were ready to approve a hemp plan they were comfortable with and Idaho was the last state to approve one.

Jensen was one of the people involved in helping craft the bill that enabled Idaho to become the 50th state in the nation to allow the production of industrial hemp.

“It took a while for us to figure out what would work, but we did it an Idaho way that I think has threaded the needle to make sure that we have a very strong stance when it comes to our (state drug) policy ... but that we also allow Idaho producers to take advantage of this new and emerging sector of the industry,” he told lawmakers Feb. 6.

According to federal regulation, a farmer is not found in violation of the law if his industrial hemp does not exceed 1 percent of THC, the psychoactive compound that gets a user of marijuana high. Idaho’s hemp program, however, sets that THC limit at 0.3 percent.

Idaho’s hemp plan allows for people to grow and process industrial hemp if they obtain a license from the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, a process that includes a background check. People can also transport it on behalf of someone with a license.

Under Idaho’s hemp plan, once a hemp product leaves the door of a processing facility, it can contain no THC at all. The farm bill does not cover processing at all.

So, unless you are a licensed hemp farmer or handler, no one in the state should handle a hemp product that contains any THC at all.

“Those are the strictest hemp standards in the entire country,” said ISDA Director Chanel Tewalt.

Farmers and others involved with the processing of hemp told House ag committee members they are happy with how the ISDA handles the program.

However, they also said hemp’s future in Idaho could go a little smoother with some changes in Idaho’s hemp plan.

That would include considering raising the allowed THC limit in Idaho closer to the federal limit, said Mattie Mead, owner and founder of Idaho-based Hempitecture, which uses industrial hemp to create high-performance building materials such as insulation.

Every planted hemp lot in Idaho has to be inspected at least once. If a plant in a hemp lot in Idaho tests higher than 0.3 percent for THC, it is flagged as a violation.

If there is a compliance issue, a grower can opt to try certain remediation efforts and ISDA inspectors will inspect the hemp again once those efforts are undertaken.

However, if remediation fails, all the hemp plants in that lot that tested hot for THC have to be destroyed, at the grower’s cost.

“No hemp ever leaves a farm in Idaho until they get an acceptable result in THC,” Tewalt said.

She added that Idaho farmers have done a great job in complying with the state’s hemp rules.

“We have great, great compliance with the customers we work with,” Tewalt said.

The risk involved in growing hemp and the potential that the crop might have to be destroyed is high and raising the allowable THC limit in Idaho is something that should be considered, Mead said.

“Industrial hemp is incredibly risky when you consider that .3 percent of THC can result in your crop getting destroyed,” he said.

He said if Idaho’s limit was increased closer to the federal limit of 1 percent, it would still be under, by a massive magnitude, anything that can be considered a social threat.

“I think we really need to put our farmers first here,” he said. “When we think about THC levels, it’s really about putting farmers first. Putting farmers first in industrial

hemp means providing them the latitude to successfully monetize a crop that poses no health or social risk in terms of the THC quantity.”

Mead also suggested Idaho could help support more hemp infrastructure, as well as hemp research.

In 2024, Hempitecture purchased and converted almost a million pounds of hemp fiber. About 42 percent of that hemp was grown in Idaho.

In 2023, Hempitecture sourced almost all of its hemp from Montana and Canada.

What changed?

Sponseller’s Idaho Hemp Processing facility in Rexburg, Mead said.

“His facility single-handedly has created the opportunity for Idaho farmers to create an agricultural commodity that Hempitecture can buy, utilize and convert into a high-performance building material,” he said.

Sponseller estimates that about 90 percent of the hemp acres grown in Idaho in 2024 were grown for Idaho Hemp Processing.

“From a hemp processing perspective, we really have no complaints,” he said. “It’s been smooth running. The program’s been done well. We can’t thank the ISDA enough. They’ve been phenomenal to work with.”

The growing part, he added, has been somewhat of a learning curve as far as growing the crop while staying in compliance with the hemp plan’s rules.

“It hasn’t necessarily been difficult, but it’s been a learning curve,” Sponseller said.

He also suggested the state take a close look at possibly raising the THC limit.

“The most important thing we need to address, soon, is the (THC limit),” he said.

Travis McAfee told lawmakers that he was the first producer in the small farming community of Howe to try hemp and it got some attention.

He said farmers in that area are limited in what they can grow, so when Sponseller’s hemp facility in Rexburg opened 60 miles away, he thought, “Here’s another tool that maybe we can use in our farm. With small farms, you have to jump at every chance you can get.”

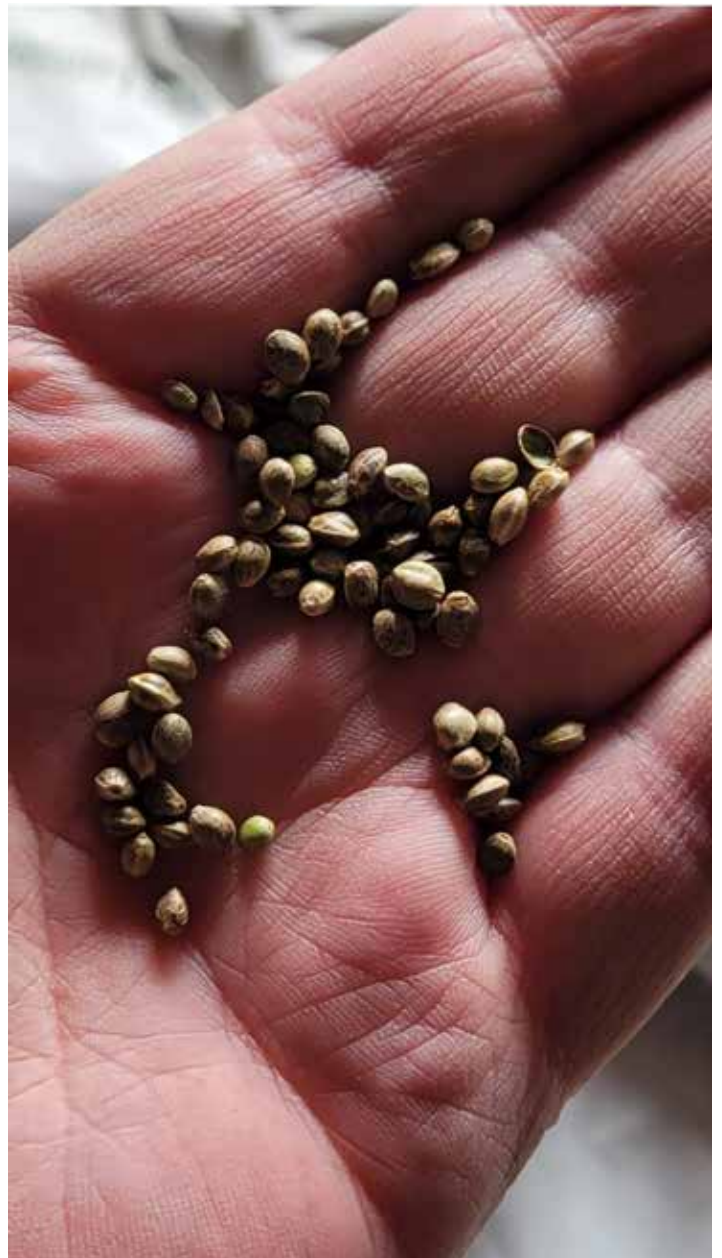
Shortly after he first planted hemp, it looked like there were just a bunch of weeds in the field and he doubted it would amount to anything.

“For a whole month, it’s sitting at about 4 inches tall and you’re like, maybe this isn’t going to grow in our area; maybe we’re too cold,” McAfee said. “Well then July hit and it grew a foot a day. Then our neighbors would come and go, ‘Hey, maybe this is a crop we can grow in this area.’”

“It’s very tiny seed,” he adds. “And then all of a sudden, you look at your crop and it’s 14-foot tall. It’s kind of exciting.”

Besides the curiosity from town folk, area farmers were also interested in the hemp crop and asked McAfee to let them know when he was ready to cut it.

“Well, there’s about 31 farmers in Howe and we had 30 of them



Hemp seeds are extremely small, but need less water than many other Idaho crops. Submitted photo

there when the chopper showed up,” he said.

Sponseller said his hemp uses less water than a barley crop and he’s finding it helps with reduced fertilizer usage for subsequent crops and healthier soil profiles.

Mead said his company is involved with a research project being administered by Oregon State University that is looking at industrial hemp as a rotational tool in potato cropping systems.

House Agricultural Affairs Committee Chairman Kevin Andrus thanked those who presented during the hemp update.

“This is very informative; very interesting,” he said. “Thank you everybody that helped get this (industry) started.” ■

BARLEY

Continued from page 3

Trevor Mulberry from Idaho Agri-Investments won the top spot in the Percent Over County Average Category. Wallace's yield – 238 bushels per acre – outperformed the Twin Falls County average by 72 percent. By comparison, Wallace's average yield exceeded the Jerome County average by 65 percent.

Wallace and Mulberry are both Scouler Barley MVP growers.

Anderson said the county average category, which compares each grower's yield to their county's historical average, ensures all growers, regardless of region, have a fair shot at winning.

Idaho's diverse climate and soil conditions are examples that make this category essential because it recognizes agronomic skill and adaptability, not just the highest absolute yield, she said.

"High-yielding winter barley seed selection (UT10201), favorable weather conditions, and strategic crop rotation – this field followed corn – were key factors in achieving a winning yield," Mulberry said in an IBC news release. "Our agronomic practices with precision in fertilization, growth regulators, herbicides, and timely irrigation all played a significant role."

Wallace said that "winning barley yields come from a solid overall program—good seed, fertility, and the right inputs—but it's the details that make the biggest difference. Paying attention to timing, plant health, and field conditions throughout the season is what really pushes yields to the top."

Dustin Miller (201 bushels an acre) of Jerome County also demonstrated outstanding agronomic practices, utilizing precision seed placement and a balance fertility plan to achieve top results for irrigated spring barley.

"Our success starts with a solid barley program built on good crop rotation, top-notch genetics like Molson Coors M-179, and a balanced fertility plan—50-60% pre-plant with the rest applied foliar alongside herbicide, fungicide and growth regulator," he said. "One of the biggest differences has been our Lemken drill. The precision seed placement and excellent seed-to-soil

"Whether a farm is in a high-yielding area or a challenging environment, the Barley Yield Contest offers growers a chance to showcase their success."

— Sydney Anderson, Idaho Barley Commission

contact really set our crop up for strong, even emergence and top yields."

Contest winners won trips to the 2025 Commodity Classic in Denver, which is billed as "America's largest farmer-led, farmer-focused agricultural and educational experience."

While maximizing yield is a key objective of the Barley Yield Contest, maintaining high quality is just as important, Anderson said.

"Our goal is to encourage growers to implement best management practices that enhance both yield and quality," she said.

She said contest organizers are exploring ways to incorporate a quality component to recognize growers who achieve both exceptional yield and superior grain quality.

The contest is open to all barley growers regardless of what variety they grow. This year's contest had participation from both malting and feed barley growers.

Anderson said the IBC is encouraging growers from all parts of the state and beyond, whether dryland or irrigated, to participate in this year's contest.

"This program will allow us to collect valuable data to enhance best practices,

improve efficiency, and drive innovation, while rewarding growers for their efforts to push the boundaries on yield," she said.

"Whether a farm is in a high-yielding area or a challenging environment, the Barley Yield Contest offers growers a chance to showcase their success," Anderson said.

If growers don't have time to submit an entry, they are encouraged to reach out to Anderson (208) 697-7236, Brett Wilken of Scouler (208)749-8881, or a county Extension agent for assistance.

Anderson can also be reached by email at Sydney.anderson@barley.idaho.gov and Wilken's email is bwilken@scouler.com.

Entry forms for the 2025 contest will be available soon on the IBC website at idahobarleycommission.org/barley-yield-contest/. ■



Beefing Up dairy: The rise of crossbreeding

By Daniel Munch
AFBF Economist

Beef-on-dairy crossbreeding is the latest step in the evolution of dairy genetics and is now a key driver of the U.S. supply of both beef and dairy cattle.

Some 72% of dairy farms are now incorporating beef genetics into their breeding programs, enhancing the marketability of dairy-origin calves by improving carcass quality and feed efficiency — traits highly valued by feedlots and packers.

Crossbreeding, along with the widespread use of sexed semen, is helping stabilize beef supply while creating a reliable revenue stream for dairy producers.

This article examines the rapid expansion of beef-on-dairy crossbreeding and its growing economic influence across the dairy and beef industries.

Background: A shift in breeding strategies

Historically, dairy farmers bred their herds using dairy bulls in the herd, ensuring a steady supply of replacement heifers.

Bulls were otherwise unable to contribute to milk production but made up about half of the calves born, so all but the best were sold into the beef market for veal, since they otherwise held little value in the beef market due to their lighter muscling and lower-quality carcass traits.

The introduction of artificial insemination (AI) in the mid-20th century revolutionized dairy breeding, allowing farmers to access superior genetics without the need for on-farm bulls — except for "clean-up" to ensure all cows are bred.

This innovation allowed producers to improve milk yields and herd efficiency while reducing the logistical and safety challenges associated with housing and maintaining bulls.

During this period, breeding efforts remained centered on dairy genetics to enhance milk production, while surplus male calves continued to be sold for veal, which was falling out of favor with consumers.

The advent of sexed semen in the 2000s further refined breeding strategies by allowing farmers to selectively produce heifers by pairing the best bulls with the best cows in the herd.

Meanwhile, lower-performing cows were still bred — often with any available bull — not to improve genetics, but simply to ensure they calved again and remained in milk production for another cycle.

This shift also allowed dairy farmers to take advantage of the emerging market for beef-on-dairy crossbred calves through AI. Once the opportunity became clear, they began using high-quality sexed semen on their best dairy cows to maximize milk production while breeding the rest of the herd with high-quality beef semen.

FIGURE 1: DOMESTIC BEEF SEMEN SALES & ESTIMATED BEEF X DAIRY CALF CROP

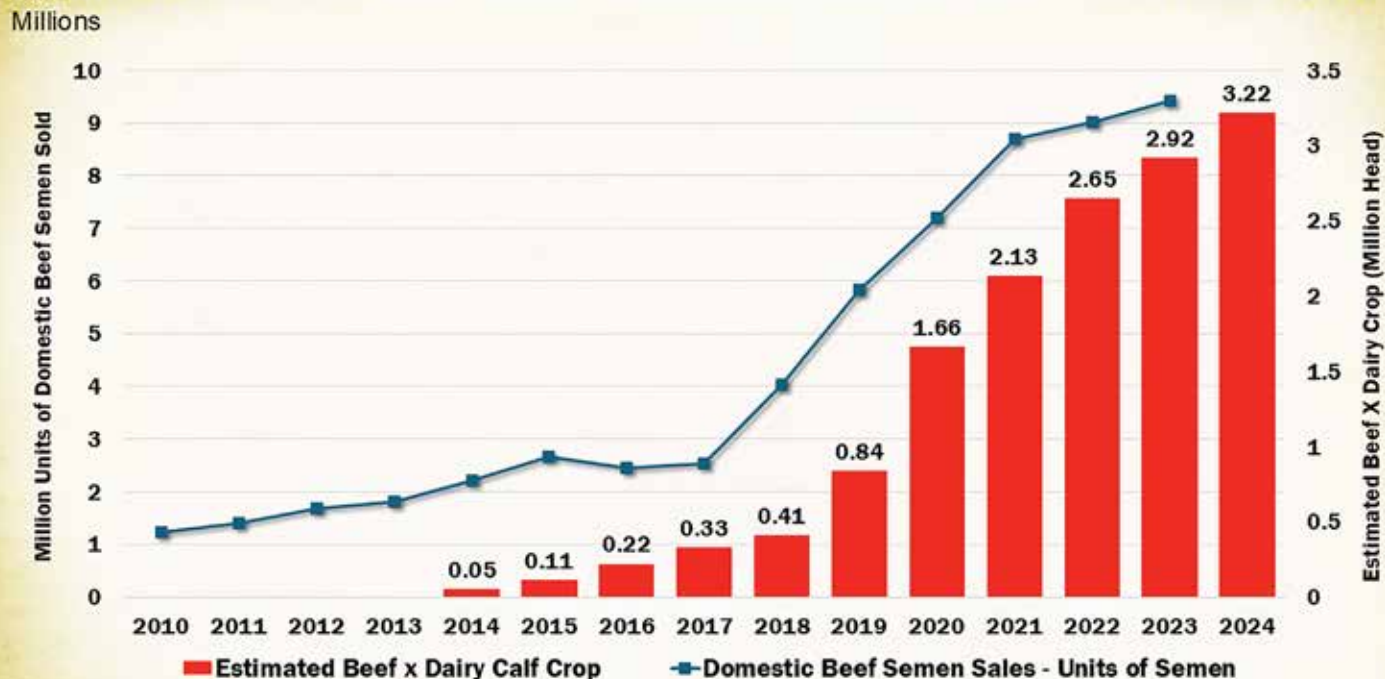
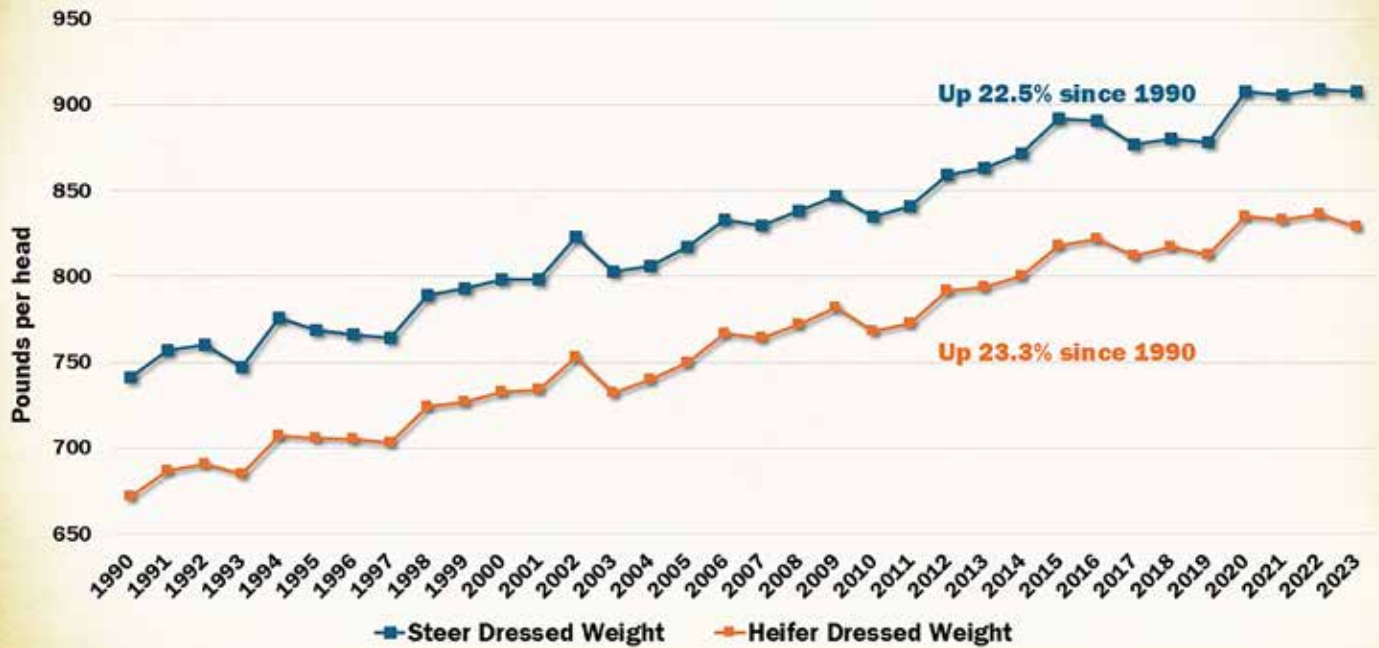


FIGURE 2: AVERAGE U.S. HEIFER VS. STEER DRESSED WEIGHTS

1990 - 2023



American Farm Bureau Federation

Source: Farm Bureau Compendium, USDA NASS

This approach produced calves with better muscling and carcass quality while maintaining a productive and efficient dairy herd.

This shift has fundamentally changed the economic landscape of dairy farming. Male dairy calves, once a liability, are now a valuable revenue source.

Beef-on-dairy crossbreeding allows farmers to command premiums for their male calves, offering a financial cushion against volatile milk markets.

Between 2002 and 2019, researchers from the University of Wisconsin estimated that dairy-origin animals, including finished dairy steers (castrated male cattle), beef-on-dairy crossbreds and cull cows, account for 18% to 24% of U.S. beef production.

Economic implications of beef-on-dairy crossbreeding

Beef-on-dairy crossbreeding can provide significant economic benefits to dairy farmers. Unlike purebred Holsteins, which face heavy beef market discounts, crossbreds offer consistent carcass traits that better meet packer and consumer expectations.

Additionally, these calves convert feed more efficiently than purebred dairy steers, reaching market weight at lower cost and ultimately lowering the overall resource footprint of beef production.

A 2024 survey completed by Purina found that 80% of dairy farmers and 58% of calf raisers receive a premium for beef-on-dairy calves compared to pure-bred dairy calves, with some reporting additional revenues of \$350 to \$700 per head.

These premiums have helped offset lower revenues during periods of reduced milk prices and provided dairy farms with a diversified income stream.

Crossbred calves also achieve higher quality grades compared

to traditional dairy steers, increasing profitability at the feedlot level.

Additional Purina research highlights the widespread adoption of beef-on-dairy crossbreeding across the dairy industry. Among surveyed producers, 72% reported they are actively implementing crossbreeding programs, while another 16% indicated they are not yet involved but are considering it.

Six percent stated they had previously engaged in crossbreeding but are not currently participating and only a small fraction — 6% — expressed no interest in adopting the practice.

For the beef industry, the rise of beef-on-dairy programs has been timely. With the U.S. cattle inventory at its lowest level in 73 years, crossbred calves sourced from dairy farms have become a critical source of supply.

These calves help fill the gaps left by declining beef cow numbers, which have been exacerbated by years of drought-induced herd liquidations across the central Plains and the West.

As beef-on-dairy crossbreeding becomes a key part of the beef supply chain, measurable indicators confirm its rapid expansion and growing influence.

Trends supporting the growth of beef-on-dairy

The rapid growth of beef-on-dairy crossbreeding is evident in several key metrics. One major indicator comes from data provided by the National Association of Animal Breeders, which tracks the sale of semen used for artificial insemination in cattle.

Domestic sales of beef semen have surged from 1.2 million units in 2010 to 9.4 million units in 2023. Of these sales, 7.9 million units were used in dairy cattle, while only 1.5 million units were used in beef herds.

This increase reflects the growing adoption of beef-on-dairy crossbreeding among dairy farmers, who are using beef semen to produce calves with greater market value.

CattleFax estimates crossbred calf production rose from just 50,000 head in 2014 to 3.22 million in 2024.

Meanwhile, dressed weights for steers and heifers (young female cattle that have not calved) have steadily increased, which can be at least partly attributed to the genetic advantages of crossbreeding.

Dressed weight refers to the weight of an animal's carcass after inedible parts have been removed for retail or further processing. All steer dressed weights rose from 741 pounds in 1990 to 908 pounds in 2023 (+22.5%), while heifers increased from 672 to 829 pounds (+23.3%).

These improvements partly reflect enhanced muscling and carcass quality in beef-on-dairy calves, which yield more lean red meat and higher-value products than pure dairy breeds.

Genetic gains not only improve processing efficiency for packers who get more meat per animal but also enhance feedlot performance and profitability, ultimately delivering greater market value for dairies.

Lower feed costs and strong beef prices have also encouraged feeders to push cattle to heavier weights more broadly, meaning these gains aren't solely driven by beef-on-dairy crossbreeding.

Identifying additional metrics to gauge the use of beef-on-dairy crossbreeding presents a challenge, as USDA does not specifically track these crossbred animals within the supply chain.

One option is comparing dairy cow inventory numbers to the overall calf crop. Assuming one calf per dairy cow, one can esti-

mate dairy cow contribution to the total cattle calf crop annually.

Between 1990 and 2023, dairy cow inventories declined by 660,000 head (6.6%), going from 10.1 million to 9.35 million. The calf crop during the same timeframe declined by 5.1 million head or 13.1%, dropping from 38.6 million to 33.5 million.

The dairy cow contribution during that period started at 26%, dropped to 24% by 1995 and has since increased steadily to 28% as both dairy cow inventories and the total calf crop have declined.

This trend highlights the increasing reliance on dairy-origin calves to bolster the beef industry, driven by a shrinking beef cow herd and the growing adoption of beef-on-dairy crossbreeding, which contributes to a more stable beef supply.

Additionally, the proportion of calves transitioning from farm inventory to feedlots can be estimated by dividing the number of cattle on feed by the previous year's calf crop. This metric helps assess whether a greater share of calves is moving into feedlots earlier rather than being retained for breeding or other uses.

In 1990, about 33% of the calf crop transitioned directly into feedlots, but by 2023, this figure had climbed to 43%.

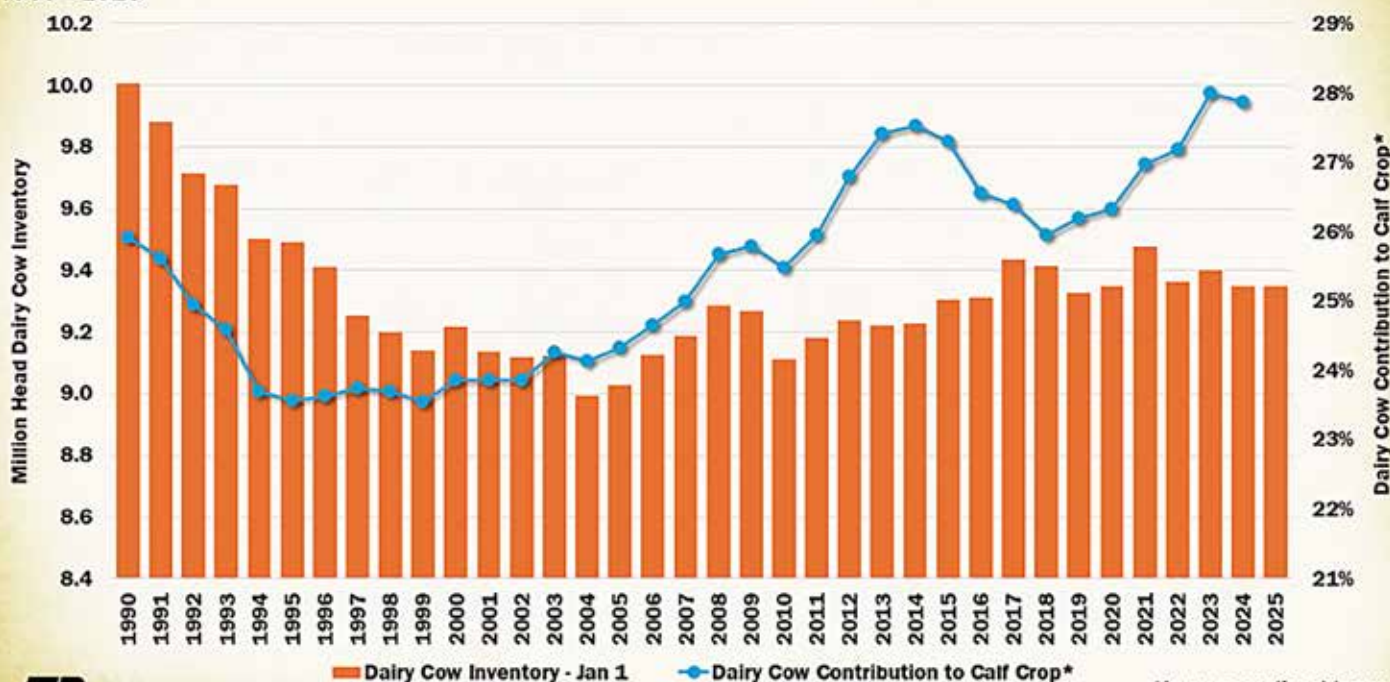
Some of this increase is likely tied to strong beef prices, which incentivize producers to market calves for beef rather than retaining them for breeding or future sales.

Additionally, the sharp decline in veal production — calf slaughter dropped from 1.79 million head in 1990 to just 293,600 head in 2023, an 84% decline — has likely redirected more dairy-origin calves toward beef production rather than traditional veal markets.

The rising share of dairy-origin calves, particularly beef-on-

FIGURE 3: DAIRY COW INVENTORY & CONTRIBUTION TO CALF CROP

1990 - 2023

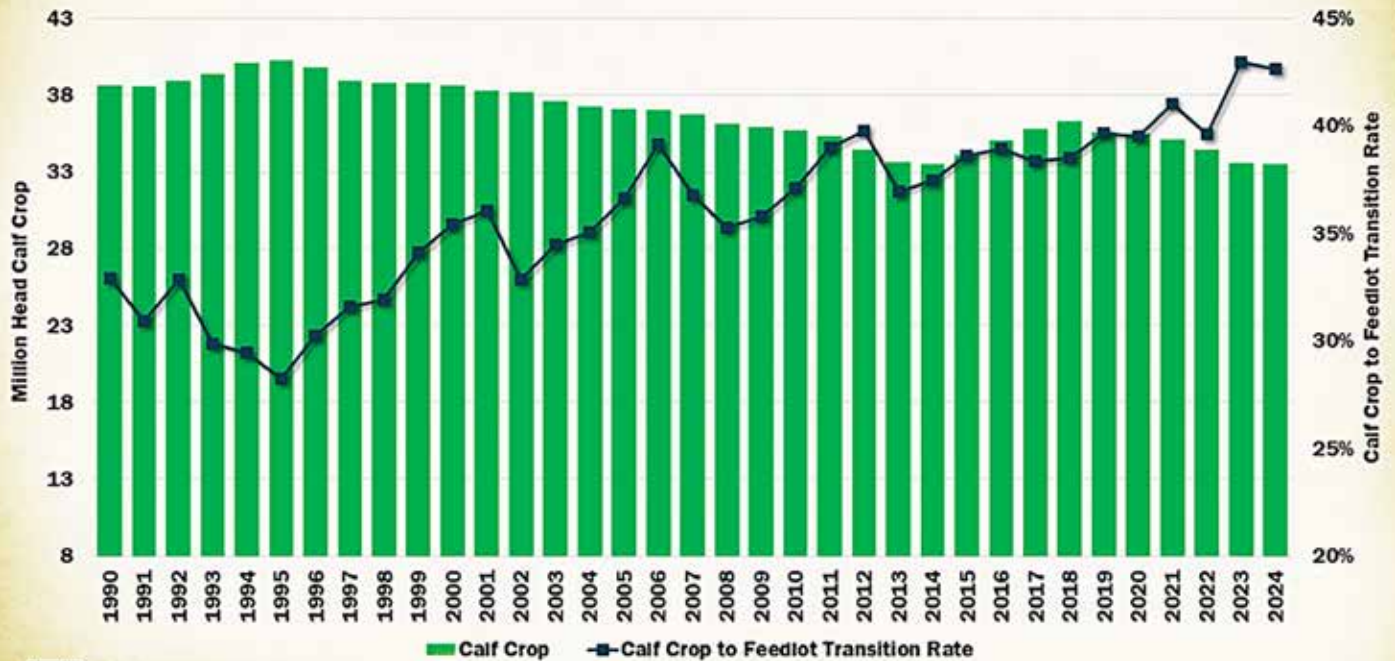


American Farm Bureau Federation

*Assumes one calf per dairy cow
Source: Farm Bureau Calculations, USDA NASS

FIGURE 4: CALF CROP TO FEEDLOT TRANSITION RATE

1990 - 2023



 American Farm Bureau Federation

Source: Farm Bureau Calculations, USDA NASS

dairy crossbreds, eventually entering the feedlot system has further contributed to the long-term increase in cattle on feed.

This metric does have limitations. Calves are not placed in feedlots immediately after birth, with a typical lag of six to 12 months between birth and feedlot placement.

As a result, some of the previous year's calf crop may not enter feedlots until the following year, complicating direct comparisons.

Additionally, dairy and beef calves historically do not enter feedlots at the same rate, as purebred beef calves often remain on pasture longer before transitioning, while dairy calves — especially crossbreds — are more likely to be placed in feeding systems at an earlier stage.

Despite these nuances, this trend suggests that as beef cow numbers decline, feedlots are relying more heavily on dairy-origin calves to maintain supply, reinforcing the growing economic significance of beef-on-dairy crossbreeding in both the dairy and beef sectors.

Potential implications for milk markets

The rise of beef-on-dairy crossbreeding may also have significant long-term effects on milk price dynamics. Historically, when milk prices rose, dairy farmers expanded their herds by retaining more replacement heifers, increasing milk production.

However, this cycle often led to an oversupply of milk, eventually pushing prices back down. With more dairy farmers now using beef semen on a portion of their herd, the number of purebred dairy heifers being raised has declined, inherently slowing the industry's ability — and perhaps desire — to rapidly expand milk production in response to modest price increases.

This shift represents a fundamental change in risk management for dairy farms. Instead of being fully exposed to the volatility of the milk market, dairy producers now have an alternative revenue stream through beef-on-dairy crossbreeding.

This dynamic could help stabilize milk markets by naturally curbing oversupply during periods of high prices, creating a more balanced production cycle.

Today, exceptionally high beef prices are reinforcing this trend, as more dairy farmers opt to breed beef-on-dairy calves to capture what appears to be a more reliable and immediate return.

As a result, fewer dairy heifers are being raised, further limiting the potential for rapid milk production expansion in the near term.

Conclusion

The widespread adoption of beef-on-dairy crossbreeding is transforming both the dairy and beef industries, creating new economic opportunities for farmers while addressing supply challenges in the beef sector.

By leveraging genetic advancements, including artificial insemination and sexed semen, dairy producers can now produce crossbred calves with improved beef traits, enhancing market value and offering a reliable revenue stream beyond milk production.

As dairy-origin crossbreds become essential to U.S. beef supply, they are reshaping cattle production and potentially providing better price and supply stability to both markets.

Beef-on-dairy strategies will continue shaping herd management, markets and risk mitigation in livestock production. ■



Photos courtesy of Juliet Marshall

This photo shows wheat plants infected with stripe rust.

Cereal pathologist concerned about Idaho stripe rust outlook

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

FORT HALL – A University of Idaho cereals pathologist is advising the state's grain farmers that conditions appear optimal for pressure from a fungal disease known as stripe rust that can devastate crop yields.

Initial symptoms of stripe rust include small chlorotic lesions on leaves, followed by the emergence of light-orange pustules from these lesions, each containing thousands of spores. Pustules develop parallel to leaf veins forming stripes.

Professor Juliet Marshall, associate director of the Idaho Agricultural Experiment Station, offered an outlook for stripe rust and

other diseases affecting wheat and barley during the East Idaho Cereals Conference, which UI Extension hosted Feb. 5.

Marshall explained prevailing winds can carry stripe rust spores originating in Northern California into southern and eastern Idaho.

Extremely wet recent weather in Northern California portends trouble with late-season stripe rust infections for Idaho grain growers from the Magic Valley through north of Idaho Falls, she said.

“When Northern California has plenty of moisture, then they usually have good growth of cereals down there, and that means the stripe rust is going to be a problem,” Marshall said.

Stripe rust surfaced in wheat and barley fields throughout

“Stripe rust is a community and a communicable disease. It’s a community disease because if your neighbor has it, it’s likely to spread very quickly into your production.”

— Juliet Marshall, Idaho Agriculture Experiment Station



This photo shows wheat plants infected with stripe rust.

southern and eastern Idaho beginning in early June last season.

On high-elevation dryland farms, Marshall worries fall-planted wheat that’s insulated throughout winter by snow cover could carry stripe rust spores into the spring, causing much earlier and more serious infestations.

“I think there was some significant inoculum that could potentially have infected some of our fall grain,” she said. “If that is the case and we have early season infections, we will have significant impact from stripe rust next spring. For dryland producers in upper-elevation areas, wheat should still be under snow and could potentially be protecting stripe rust. They need to be scouting early in spring when wheat plants are greening up.”

Most irrigated farms are located at lower elevations, where Marshall believes the weather has been warm enough this season to melt the snow cover, exposing stripe rust spores to hard freezes, which should kill any inoculum.

Growers can effectively protect themselves from stripe rust by applying fungi-

cides or planting resistant wheat or barley varieties.

A few high-yielding wheat varieties that are commonly raised in the region – including the hard white spring wheat UI Gold, the hard white spring wheat WB7696 and the hard red spring wheat WB9707 – performed worse than expected against stripe rust last season.

Options that continue to exhibit strong resistance include Dayn, Hale, WB9668, WB9636, WB9623, Seahawk and Ryan, among others.

“A lot of people weren’t spraying fungicides because stripe rust came in so late and it significantly affected the yield of some varieties,” Marshall said, adding that one field planted with a susceptible hard white spring wheat sustained yield losses of more than 50%.

Marshall encourages farmers to report stripe rust immediately upon spotting it to help warn other area farmers. UI Extension manages a pest alert site that provides farmers with advanced warning when diseases such as stripe rust are poised to move into their area.

The site, <https://pnwpestaalert.net/>, also offers management guidance.

“Stripe rust is a community and a communicable disease,” Marshall said. “It’s a community disease because if your neighbor has it, it’s likely to spread very quickly into your production.”

Northern Idaho farmers also appear to be in store for a challenging year with stripe rust, according to a 2025 stripe rust forecast recently issued by Xianming Chen, a research plant pathologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Agricultural Research Service in Pullman, Wash.

Chen is predicting potentially severe stripe rust infections in northern Idaho during the upcoming season, with yield losses of up to 57% possible.

Chen wrote that warm weather last November and December has been conducive to stripe rust survival.

Chen advises farmers who plant winter wheat varieties ranging from susceptible to moderately susceptible to stripe rust should consider an early fungicide application at the time of herbicide application. ■



A drone hovers over an Idaho farm field.

Photos by Brian Morgan

The evolution of crop spraying: Ag drones in Idaho

By **Brian Morgan**
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

As I made my way through Melba, Idaho, the day fading into evening, the world seemed to glow.

The sun crept closer to the horizon, casting a golden hue on the farm fields, and I couldn't help but appreciate the rural ag land that ushered me down toward the Snake River.

I was en route to Celebration Park to test a few jig lures in hopes of catching some smallmouth bass. My mind was preoccupied with visions of the water and the thrill of the catch.

Yet, something unexpected caused me to hit the brakes. Hovering above a nearby field was what I can only describe as a futuristic leviathan of technology: an agricultural drone, buzzing methodically as it sprayed crops below.

For a moment, I couldn't help but chuckle at the surrealism of it all. It was as if I'd stumbled into an

“This precision not only saves money but also minimizes the environmental impact by preventing overspray and runoff into nearby ecosystems.”

— Jace Dille, Idaho Drone Spraying LLC

apocalyptic sci-fi movie—a world where machines had risen, and this drone was the harbinger of a robotic takeover.

Of course, the humor of the moment settled in quickly, and my curiosity got the better of me. Pulling over, I met Jace Dille, the operator of this impressive piece of technology, who works with Idaho Drone Spraying LLC.

What began as an unplanned stop turned into an enlightening conversation about the evolution of crop spraying and the role drones now play in Idaho’s agricultural landscape. That conversation inspired this article.

Crop spraying has come a long way from the days of manual application. Early methods involved farmers painstakingly applying chemicals by hand or with rudimentary equipment that was time-consuming and labor-intensive.

By the mid-20th century, the advent of tractors and eventually crop-dusting airplanes revolutionized the process, allowing farmers to treat vast areas more efficiently.

Enter the era of ag drones, which could be a game-changing innovation in modern farming. These aerial marvels combine precision, efficiency, and sustainability, addressing many of the challenges posed by older methods.

As Dille explained, drones like the one he operates can spray crops with pinpoint accuracy, reducing waste and ensuring that chemicals are applied only where needed.

“This precision not only saves money but also minimizes the environmental impact by preventing overspray and runoff into nearby ecosystems,” Dille said.

Another advantage of ag drones, he said, is their accessibility. Unlike airplanes, which require significant investment and specialized training, drones are comparatively affordable and easier to operate.

Farmers can program them to follow specific flight paths, allowing for consistent and repeatable applications. Additionally, Dille said, drones can navigate terrain that might be difficult or impossible for traditional machinery, such as steep hillsides or waterlogged fields.

Dille says this versatility makes them an invaluable tool for Idaho farmers, whose fields often vary in size, shape, and topography.

In speaking with Josh Wilson, a member of the Idaho Farm Bureau Federation and the owner/operator of Wilson Ag Consulting and Drone Services, I learned that drones are equipped with advanced sensors and imaging technology that go beyond spraying.

They can monitor crop health in real time, identifying issues like pest infestations, nutrient deficiencies, or water stress before they become widespread problems.



TOP: Drone operator Josh Wilson talks about the use of drones in agriculture. ABOVE: Drones are playing an increasing role in Idaho agriculture.

Wilson said this data allows farmers to make informed decisions and take targeted actions, improving yields and reducing overall costs.

Here is what Wilson had to say about his operations: “Our consulting and ag spraying services are designed to enhance crop health and maximize yield through precision drone technology,” he said. “It’s incredibly efficient and beneficial.”

As I stood in that field near Melba, watching the drone complete its work with military precision, I couldn’t help but marvel at how far agricultural technology has come.

What once might have required hours of manual labor and guesswork can now be accomplished in minutes with incredible accuracy. For Idaho farmers, ag drones represent not just another tool in their arsenal but a glimpse into the future of efficient farming.

The next time you’re driving through the scenic farmland of Idaho, keep an eye out for these high-tech helpers. They’re not harbingers of an apocalyptic machine uprising, but rather, a testament to human ingenuity and our ongoing commitment to feeding the world while improving efficiency.

As for me, I eventually made it to the Snake River that evening, but I left with more than just a fishing story. I left with a newfound appreciation for the incredible innovation shaping the future of agriculture right here in Idaho. ■

(Brian Morgan is a Boise-based videographer for Idaho Farm Bureau Federation.)

Idahoans receive governor's awards for excellence in agriculture during Ag Summit

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

BOISE – “The Changing Face of Agriculture” was the theme of this year’s Idaho Ag Summit.

Several hundred farmers, ranchers and other leaders of the state’s agricultural industry discussed a wide array of topics during the Larry Branen Idaho Ag Summit in Boise Feb. 18.

The changing nature of agriculture, and how to adapt, was a main area of discussion during the summit.

“We seem to always live in a sea of change,” said Larry Branen, the retired University of Idaho researcher who the conference is named for.

Branen, who was raised on a farm near Wilder, retired in 2010 after 25 years of service to U of I and has served as the dean of the university’s College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.

He said the conference, since 1995, has been one of the highlights for Idaho agriculture and added that “we have been able to come together and discuss emerging trends and challenges in agriculture.”

While plenty of change is happening in agriculture, it’s happening as well in Washington, D.C., keynote speaker Cody Lyon of American Farm Bureau Federation told Ag Summit participants.

“This is an unbelievably unique time,”

“The worst thing to do is pull back and do nothing,” Lyon said. “The one thing you don’t ever do is quit. I know the people in agriculture never quit.”

— Cody Lyon, AFBF



Photos by Sean Ellis

Michael Parrella, right, dean of U of I’s College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, received a lifetime achievement award at the 2025 Ag Summit, presented here by Gov. Brad Little. Parrella will retire in June after serving nine years as CALS dean.

said Lyon, AFBF’s managing director of advocacy and political affairs programs.

What will happen in D.C. and with issues important to agriculture, such as immigration, tariffs, trade and the need for a new farm bill, is not known at this time, Lyon said, but he encouraged the ag industry to remain engaged.

He also reminded them that polls show Americans strongly support farmers and ranchers.

“The worst thing to do is pull back and do nothing,” Lyon said. “The one thing you don’t ever do is quit. I know the people in agriculture never quit.”

Change is natural and unavoidable, but adapting to it is a choice, said Braden Jensen, the co-chair of this year’s summit, who

added: “Idaho agriculture is the backbone of Idaho’s economy and it’s woven into the state’s character.”

Several of the people who have helped weave agriculture into Idaho’s character over the years were honored at Ag Summit, including Michael Parrella, dean of U of I’s College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, who will retire in June after serving nine years as CALS dean.

Parrella received a special lifetime achievement award that is not given at Ag Summit every year but is one that is presented to individuals “who have had a very, very broad influence on Idaho agriculture,” said Ag Summit Executive Director Rick Waitley.

While presenting the award, Waitley

read off a long list of accomplishments that Parrella has achieved during his time as dean.

The award plaque reads: “Michael Parrella, recognized for vision, leadership and contribution to the success and accomplishments of Idaho agriculture.”

“He has truly been a great leader for Idaho agriculture,” Branen said, and Jensen added: “You have truly left your mark on this state and the ag industry.”

Parrella said it was an incredible honor to receive the award and that it was really an award for all of CALS and the Vandal family.

“As the dean of a college, you can only do certain things,” he said. “You need a team of people that work together ... tirelessly, buy into the vision and make things happen.”

Parrella was also one of five people who received Governor’s Awards for Excellence in Agriculture during the summit. His award was for education/advocacy.

Parrella is credited with being the vision behind several major infrastructure projects undertaken or completed by CALS during his tenure there.

“Dr. Parrella’s fingerprints are on many ... projects that have come into existence while under his direction ...,” his award bio reads.

North Idaho Wheat farmer Bill Flory received a governor’s award for technical innovation. He has been farming since 1976 and manages a diversified farm in northcentral Idaho that grows wheat, malt barley, oats, bluegrass, canola, garbanzo beans and hay.

“Bill has supported the wheat industry for decades in many capacities,” his award bio states ... “Fiscal conservatism and responsibility have always been a priority, ensuring wheat farmers throughout the state received a beneficial return on investment through research, education and outreach, and market development, both overseas and domestically.”

Brent Olmstead, who received a governor’s award for marketing innovation, has served Idaho agriculture in many capacities over the years.

“Brent Olmstead’s life has had a constant connection to agriculture,” his award bio states.



TOP: North Idaho Wheat farmer, Bill Flory, received the governor’s award for technical innovation. ABOVE: Brent Olmstead received the marketing innovation award.

That includes working on the family farm, for John Deere, consulting for Milk Producers of Idaho and working for University of Idaho as its associate dean for government affairs and external relations.

His award bio says he has “worked tirelessly on advancing issues in agriculture, natural resources, immigration and the environment.”

Former Idaho State Department of Agriculture Director Celia Gould received a governor’s award for lifetime achievement. Gould was the longest-serving ISDA director in Idaho history and is also a life-long rancher. She served 16 years in the Idaho Legislature and 16 years as ISDA director.

“Few Idahoans have had such a tremendous impact on agriculture as Celia

Gould,” her award bio states.

She was introduced for the award by former Idaho Gov. Butch Otter, who appointed Gould as ISDA director in 2006. He pointed out she led the ag department through a tough economic time and kept it running efficiently despite sustaining severe budget cuts.

According to her award bio, “She successfully led the agency through some of the most severe budget cuts in Idaho history, without cutting services to Idaho’s producers.”

“There are few people who understand every aspect of the Idaho agriculture industry like Celia Gould,” said Gov. Brad Little.

Southern Idaho farmer Blake Matthews was awarded a Governor’s Award for Excellence in Environmental Stewardship.

Matthews farms alongside his father on a 2,700-acre diversified operation in the Oakley basin and they grow crops such as potatoes, sugar beets, malt barley, corn, wheat and alfalfa.

The Matthews family also raises cow-calf pairs and operates a cattle feedlot.

According to his award bio, Matthews “has worked closely with his agronomist over the past 14 years “testing and adopting various products, procedures and practices across his farm to improve soil health, restore organic material to the ecosystem, reduce pest and disease pressure, increase yield and limit input costs.”

Jensen said the award recipients’ efforts have shaped, and are shaping, the future of agriculture.

“You guys are truly an inspiration to us all,” he said. “Thank you for all you do for this state.”

During the conference, U of I Agricultural Economist Brett Wilder pointed out how important agriculture is to the state’s economy, noting that the agriculture industry is responsible for one in every nine jobs in Idaho, 17 percent of the state’s total economic output and 13 percent of Idaho’s gross state product.

He also noted that chicken eggs have become one of the state’s top agricultural commodities in terms of total farm-gate receipts, which is what the farmer or rancher receives directly for their commodity.



TOP: Former Idaho State Department of Agriculture Director Celia Gould is presented a governor’s award for lifetime achievement by former Idaho Gov. Butch Otter Feb. 18 during the annual Idaho Ag Summit. She was one of several Idahoans who received governor’s awards for excellence in agriculture. ABOVE: Southern Idaho farmer Blake Matthews, middle, received the Excellence in Environmental Stewardship award, presented here by Gov. Brad Little, left, and Lt. Gov. Scott Bedke.

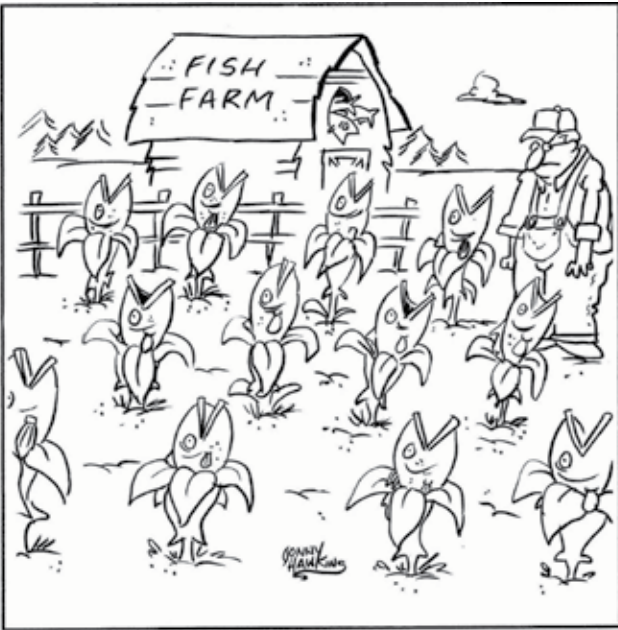
U of I economists forecast that the chicken egg sector in Idaho brought in \$166 million in farm-gate receipts in 2024, which would make eggs one of Idaho’s

main ag commodities.

“Chicken eggs is probably going to be one of our top 10 (ag) commodities now,” Wilder said. ■

Country Chuckles

By Jonny Hawkins



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ABOVE: Spalding's catchfly is found in Idaho and is listed as a Threatened species within the ESA. Oregon Department of Agriculture photo; ABOVE RIGHT: Whitebark Pine is listed as an Endangered Species in the ESA. National Park Service photo



Private forests and herbicide use

By **Tim Prather**
University of Idaho

Weeds can interfere with production and conservation goals for private forest owners. In addition, noxious weed laws at a federal and state level further require us to control these regulated plant species.

Herbicides are often used to manage weeds to further the survival of trees from seed trees or transplanted tree seedlings. We often use herbicides to meet conservation and regulatory goals as well.

The registration of herbicides at the federal level is accomplished through the Federal Insecticide Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA). Registration of herbicides has been in place for many years and is nothing new for us.

However, for years, there has been a collision between EPA and both U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service, the agencies responsible for the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The ESA requires government agencies to ensure actions they take do not jeopardize threatened or endangered species, and that includes EPA. EPA's responsibility here is significant.

There are over 1,700 listed species within the ESA and EPA has to develop strategies not only for herbicides, but for other pesticides as well.

The collision is FIFRA registration of an herbicide that may jeopardize a species protected by ESA. So, are you confused yet?

While there are studies required to examine potential effects on animal and plant species prior to labeling an herbicide, those studies were not deemed sufficient for protection under the ESA.

Court actions taken against EPA resulted in a new approach to address potential jeopardy of listed species to all pesticides. I am focusing on herbicides for now; strategies for other pesticides are in the process.

The EPA has developed strategies to protect endangered species and endangered species habitats from herbicides. The strategies include the Vulnerable Species Action Plan (<https://downloads.regulations.gov/EPA-HQ-OPP-2023-0327-0208/content.pdf>) and the Final Herbicide Strategy.

The approach for the Final Herbicide



'I wanted to be sure private forest owners know that changes are underway for how we use herbicides in areas designated as habitat for threatened and endangered species.'

Strategy is to describe protection for ESA listed species on pesticide labels and in bulletins that are located at a website, Bulletins Live! Two (<https://www.epa.gov/endangered-species/bulletins-live-two-view-bulletins>).

The strategy is embodied in a document called, "Herbicide Strategy to Reduce Exposure of Federally Listed Endangered and Threatened Species and Designated Critical Habitats from the Use of Conventional Agricultural Herbicides."

The strategy covers conventional herbicides, focused on agricultural uses. Application of herbicides within a Pesticide Use Limitation Area (PULA) requires mitigation to avoid impacting the ESA listed species.

Those mitigations can be applied during registration or registration review.

The strategy involves a three-step process to decide on herbicide use within PULAs.

The first step, Step 1, establishes population-level impacts on the listed species that are categorized as not likely impacted, low, medium or high.

In Step 2, the potential impacts from Step 1 determine mitigation strategies such as avoiding spray drift or if the impacts may result from runoff/erosion, then techniques to avoid runoff or erosion would be listed.

If medium or high impacts are possible, then more mitigation strategies are required. These strategies are assigned points and the higher the potential impact, the greater the number of points required with 3, 6 or 9 points for low, medium and high potential impact, respectively.

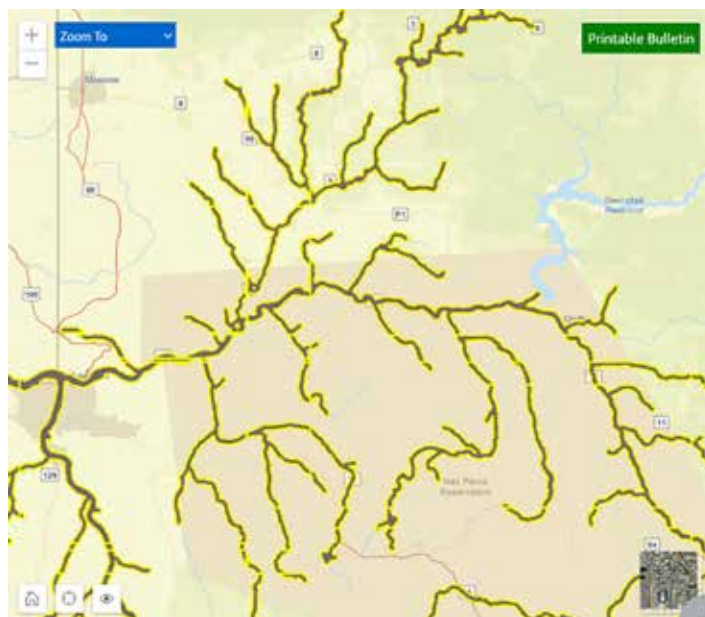
Obtaining points can entail participation in a conservation program that provides 2 mitigation points. Points may be assigned based on runoff potential for a specific county and only a few counties in Idaho are rated higher than low runoff potential (identified in the document referenced above).

Then in Step 3, areas where the mitigations identified in Step 2 are identified. One example I found for Idaho involves PULAs in areas critical for salmon.

The process for using herbicides and other pesticides is evolving and it is important for all of us to be informed and to help inform the process.

Through workshops held in Oregon and Washington, for example, changes to mitigation strategies were made. Recently I served on the Science Policy Committee for the Weed Science Society of America and each month we discussed this EPA/ESA process.

Currently these strategies are for agricultural fields but already I have seen where herbicide applications in rangelands are poten-



TOP: Chinook salmon has Pesticide Use Limitation Areas mapped within Idaho and accessible on the Bulletins Live! Two web site. USFWS photo; **ABOVE: Bulletins Live! Two web site and the Pesticide Use Limitation Areas (PULAs) for active Endangered Species Protection Bulletins.** Above are some of the PULA's for salmon. EPA Endangered Species photo

tially being affected. As the strategy evolves, we need to understand how use of herbicides in forested areas is affected.

I wanted to be sure private forest owners know that changes are underway for how we use herbicides in areas designated as habitat for threatened and endangered species.

To gain understanding of species in Idaho that fall under ESA, we have the Governor's Office of Species Conservation (<https://species.idaho.gov/>).

In addition, the Weed Science Society of America has resources to help with education on how EPA addresses ESA (<https://wssa.net/endangered-species/>). ■

(Tim Prather is a professor in the Plant Sciences Department at the University of Idaho. He also is senior associate director of the UI Rangeland Center. He can be reached at tprather@uidaho.edu.)



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Photos by Joel Benson

Idaho's 2025 water supply outlook is looking pretty good based on mountain snowpack levels as of March 20.

2025 water supply looking pretty good

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Based on mountain snowpack levels, 2025 should be a pretty decent water year for Idaho irrigators.

That's great news for farmers, and recreationists, who depend on the state's reservoirs to provide water during Idaho's hot, dry summer months.

As of March 20, snowpack levels in most Idaho basins were well above normal, and the amount of carryover water in Idaho reservoirs was close to normal.

"Based on the snowpack ... it looks good," Idaho Water Users Association Executive Director Paul Arrington said about the state's 2025 water supply outlook.

"The snowpack is looking pretty good," said Craig Chandler, the watermaster for Water District 1, Idaho's largest and most important water district, which encompasses the upper Snake River system.

The upper Snake reservoir system can hold 4.1 million acre-feet of water, enough to supply well

over 1 million acres of farmland in eastern and southern Idaho with irrigation water.

As of March 20, the upper Snake reservoir system was 81 percent full and had about 300,000 acre-feet more water than average.

“Things are shaping up to be a decent water year,” Chandler said.

Snowpack in the Boise basin was 120 percent of average on March 20.

“All of our reservoirs should fill this year,” said Bob Carter, project manager for the Boise Project Board of Control, which provides water to five irrigation districts that service a total of 165,000 acres of irrigated ground in the Treasure Valley of southwestern Idaho.

That said, he added, how the water supply year ultimately turns out could have a lot to do with how the snow melts off and how much actually makes it into the reservoirs.

“If it comes off nice and mellow ... we should have a really good water season,” Carter said. “It all depends now on how that snow melts off. That’s Mother Nature’s call.”

Arrington agreed with that viewpoint.

From a snowpack standpoint, things look good, he said. But he pointed out that a few years back, snowpack levels also looked good, but snowmelt and runoff weren’t ideal and a lot of water didn’t make it to the river.

“We’re optimistic,” Arrington said. “Things look good, but that doesn’t mean we can relax. There are multiple elements to our water supply. Snowpack is one part of the story and that story looks good right now.”

Peak snowpack in Idaho basins typically occurs around the first part of April.

As of March 20, most basins in Idaho had more than 100

“Things look good, but that doesn’t mean we can relax. There are multiple elements to our water supply. Snowpack is one part of the story and that story looks good right now.”

— Paul Arrington, Idaho Water Users Association

percent of average snowpack. The upper Snake above Palisades was sitting at 109 percent of average and the upper Snake above American Falls was also at 109 percent.

Snowpack in the Weiser basin was at 138 percent of normal and it was at 132 percent in the Payette basin and 124 percent in the Boise basin.

Other basins as of March 20: Owyhee (135 percent), Bear River (113 percent), Portneuf-Blackfoot-Willow (130 percent), Salmon (117), Big Wood (116), Little Wood (104), Big Lost (107), Little Lost (97).

The Northern Panhandle (96 percent), Coeur d’Alene (88) and Clearwater (97) basins were below 100 percent of average, but the 5-day forecast as of March 20 favored more precipitation.

“We’re coming into a wet period, especially in North Idaho,” Erin Whorton, a water supply specialist with the NRCS, said during a March 20 water supply meeting. ■





Submitted photo

Retail egg prices have hit record levels and USDA is forecasting they will increase by another 40 percent this year. USDA has released a “comprehensive plan” to attempt to combat skyrocketing egg prices.

Egg prices are soaring and forecast to go higher

Editor’s note: Wholesale egg prices have been on the decline since this story was written in mid March. They began declining after USDA in late February released a comprehensive plan to combat soaring retail egg prices.

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – The bad news is that retail egg prices in the U.S. have hit a record level.

The worse news is that USDA forecasts they could increase by another 40 percent in 2025.

The good news is that USDA has re-

leased a comprehensive plan to try to reign in soaring egg prices.

The average price in the U.S. for a dozen eggs at the retail level was under \$1.50 in January 2021. This January, the average price was a tad under \$5.

According to USDA’s Food Price Outlook for 2025, which was updated Feb. 25, “Retail egg prices continue to experience volatile month-to-month changes ... Egg prices in January 2025 were 53 percent higher than in January 2024 and surpassed the previous peak prices in January 2023.”

That same report adds: “Egg prices are predicted to increase 41 percent in 2025....”

The main reason for high egg prices is

linked to bird flu, which has resulted in well over 160 million egg-laying hens in the U.S. being culled since the outbreak began in late 2021.

This has resulted in a classic supply and demand imbalance and the result is higher egg prices.

On Feb. 26, USDA Secretary Brooke Rollins, in an article that appeared in the Wall Street Journal, announced a “comprehensive strategy to combat avian influenza” in an attempt to reign in skyrocketing egg prices.

Record high egg prices “matters for American families because eggs are a healthy, accessible and generally affordable

source of protein,” the ag secretary wrote in introducing her plan.

In some cases, Americans are seeing retail egg prices between \$6-10 a dozen, even more, she wrote.

“This is due in part to continuing outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza, which has devastated American poultry farmers and slashed the egg supply over the past two years,” Rollins stated.

USDA’s plan involves a “five-pronged strategy.”

She said the USDA will invest up to \$1 billion “to curb this crisis and make eggs affordable again.”

That includes \$500 million to help U.S. poultry producers implement what USDA calls “gold-standard biosecurity measures.”

“USDA has developed a successful pilot program, called Wild-life Biosecurity Assessments, to identify and implement ... safety measures,” Rollins said.

She noted that between January 2023 and January 2025, about 150 sites have undergone assessments, and producers have addressed the risks that USDA inspectors identified.

Only one of those sites has since been affected by avian flu, according to USDA.

“USDA will now provide this consulting service at no cost to all commercial egg-laying chicken farms,” Rollins said, and USDA will pay up to 75 percent of the cost to repair biosecurity vulnerabilities.

USDA will also make up to \$400 million of increased financial relief available to farmers whose flocks are affected by avian flu.

Rollins said USDA is “exploring the use of vaccines and therapeutics for laying chickens.”

“This should help reduce the need to ‘depopulate’ flocks, which means killing chickens on a farm where there’s an outbreak,” she said.

The ag department secretary said the U.S. will also “remove unnecessary regulatory burdens on egg producers where possible.”

Rollins said the U.S. will consider allowing the temporary import of eggs to reduce egg costs in the short term.

“This ... strategy won’t erase the problem overnight, but we’re

“To every family struggling to buy eggs: We hear you, we’re fighting for you, and help is on the way.”

— Brooke Rollins, USDA Secretary

confident that it will restore stability to the egg market over the next three to six months,” Rollins said. “This approach will also ensure stability over the next four years and beyond.”

“To every family struggling to buy eggs: We hear you, we’re fighting for you, and help is on the way,” Rollins stated.

As part of USDA’s plan, Rollins said the department also wants to “make it easier for American families to raise backyard chickens.”

Commenting on USDA’s strategy, American Farm Bureau Federation President Zippy Duvall released a statement saying that “We appreciate USDA’s blueprint for tackling avian influenza. America’s farmers are committed to ensuring a safe and abundant food supply, and these investments to advance biosecurity and research will further equip them to combat the threat of (avian flu).”

“Farm Bureau looks forward to working with Secretary Rollins and the expert team at USDA to bring (avian flu) under control while ensuring solutions are safe, effective and practical,” Duvall stated.

As a result of egg prices increasing significantly, eggs have suddenly become one of Idaho’s top agricultural commodities in terms of farm-gate revenue, which is what the farmer or rancher receives for their commodity.

From 2016 to 2021 in Idaho, the chicken egg category brought in between \$30-50 million per year in farm-gate receipts, making eggs a “medium” ag commodity in Idaho those years in terms of total farm-gate revenue.

In 2022, when the cost of retail eggs started exploding, that number jumped to \$125 million and it was \$120 million in 2023.

University of Idaho economists estimate that eggs brought in about \$166 million in farm-gate revenue in 2024.

That means eggs could rank as high as No. 8 in Idaho among ag commodities behind the state’s traditional stalwart ag sectors such as milk, cattle, potatoes, wheat, hay, sugar beets and barley. ■



We must invest in Idaho's water future

By Lt. Gov. Scott Bedke

If you turn on a faucet today, you care about water policy. It's that simple.

Water is the foundation of our daily lives, our economy, and Idaho's future. It fuels our farms, powers our communities, and ensures our families have the resources they need to thrive.

That's why Idaho must take decisive action to invest in long-term storage and infrastructure projects now before we find ourselves facing a crisis we could have prevented.

Over the past year, I have been directly involved in negotiations between senior surface water users and junior groundwater districts, working alongside Idaho Water Resource Board Chairman Jeff Raybould to reach a workable mitigation plan.

These discussions were not easy, but they were necessary. I am proud of the progress we have made in securing a path forward that ensures all water users have a reliable and sustainable future.

However, one thing became abundantly clear during these negotiations: without dedicated ongoing funding for water infrastructure projects, this plan will not work. This was the one point that every stakeholder in the discussions agreed upon, and it reflects the reality for water users around the state.

Gov. Brad Little's commitment to an ongoing investment of \$30 million annually

in Idaho's water projects during his 2025 State of the State address was a critical first step.

This funding, if the legislature approves it, will support critical infrastructure upgrades statewide, improve water storage, and help implement the recently enacted 2024 Stipulated Mitigation plan between surface and groundwater users.

It would also help recharge the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer, ensuring our state's primary source of irrigation, power generation, and drinking water remains viable for generations to come.

We cannot afford to ignore the realities of water scarcity. The ESPA has faced significant challenges, and our state's rapid growth places new strains on our limited water supply.

Drought cycles are intensifying, and if we don't act now, future generations will pay the price. Investing in water supply today is an investment in Idaho's prosperity, independence, and agricultural strength.

Beyond the ESPA, we must look at additional storage solutions. Senate Joint Memorial 101 calls for updating studies on water storage availability and identifying new projects.

This includes evaluating the feasibility of rebuilding the Teton Dam and expanding storage capacity at key locations such as Minidoka Dam, Jackson Lake Dam, and Twin Springs Dam.

These projects, if pursued, will provide



long-term benefits in irrigation, flood control, power generation, and recreation. But if we are going to be able to afford these projects, we need to begin budgeting a predictable and steady stream of funding.

The stakes are high. If we fail to act, water shortages will ripple through every sector of Idaho's economy. Farmers and ranchers depend on certainty in their water supply.

Our power grid relies on stable hydroelectric resources. Growing communities need sustainable access to drinking water. Every aspect of Idaho's way of life hinges on responsible water management.

This is not just about budget line items and infrastructure plans. This is about Idaho's way of life.

Water policy may not always grab headlines, but its impact is felt every day by every Idahoan. Whether you're a farmer in the Magic Valley or Eastern Idaho, a business owner in the Treasure Valley, or a family in the Panhandle, you rely on the decisions we make now to ensure water security for future generations.

I applaud Sen. Van Burtenshaw and the many cosponsors who introduced Senate Bill 1128 to provide the funding to implement the agreement we reached after a summer of hard work.

Today is the time to invest in Idaho's water future so we don't pay the price tomorrow. Let's make the responsible choice. ■



LEFT: The Boise River flows by Julia Davis Park. Photo by Sean Ellis

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DIRT ROAD DISCUSSIONS PODCAST

Episode 78- Helping After Devastation: Farm Rescue

One day on a long flight over the Pacific Ocean, a fellow airline pilot asked Captain Bill Gross what he would do when he retired. Without hesitation, Bill answered, "I'm going to be this Good Samaritan that buys a tractor and goes around helping farm families plant their crops when they have a major injury or illness." That generated some laughter until his coworker realized Bill was serious. For 20 years now, Farm Rescue has organized volunteers and resources to help farmers who have gone through devastating events, including natural disasters, in a nine-state area. Dan Erdmann, Director of Communications at Farm Rescue, tells stories about neighbors helping neighbors. He talks about how Farm Rescue had to remind farmers that the help coming into their fields and pastures was a "hand up" and not a "hand out."