GEM STATE Producer
Idaho Farm Bureau
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Idaho Wheat Acres Holding Steady

The Zipline

By Zippy Duvall
President, American Farm Bureau Federation

Fertilizer prices forcing tough decisions

Recently, I made a difficult decision that no farmer wants to make. I chose not to buy commercial fertilizer for my hay fields this year.

It wasn't an easy call. Like so many farmers across the country, I've been looking at rising fertilizer costs and trying to make the numbers work. And this year, they just didn't.

That decision doesn't stay on paper. It shows up in the field. Spring is usually when we see our healthiest and most abundant hay crop. Without the commercial fertilizer we rely on, and facing extreme drought on top of that, I know we're going to come up short. I've turned to substitutes like chicken litter where I can, but it's not a full replacement.

That means lower yields, fewer bales of hay, and a more difficult road ahead when it comes time to feed my cattle through winter. And unfortunately, my story isn't unique; it's happening on farms across the country.

See **DUVALL,** page 6

The President's Desk

By Matt Dorsey
President, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

Thanks for engaging, planting the seed

The primary elections are now behind us.

In our last issue, we shared the voter guide and encouraged each of you to engage in the election process. Thank you for doing exactly that. Thank you for taking the time to research candidates, ask questions, have conversations, and cast your vote for the people you felt would best represent agriculture, rural communities, and Idaho values.

That process matters.

Elections do not happen by accident. They require participation from voters who care enough to get involved, and they require candidates who are willing to step forward and serve.

Running for office is often a thankless job. It demands time away from family, long days on the road, difficult conversations, criticism, uncertainty, and sacrifice. Whether a candidate wins or loses, every single person who puts

See **DORSEY,** page 6

Inside Farm Bureau

By Zak Miller
CEO, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

The original weather modification – prayer

Idaho is a special state, an arid desert with fertile soil, cool nights that suppress disease and pests compared to other regions, and enough frost-free days to grow an impressive variety of crops.

Idaho was, is, and will remain an agricultural powerhouse. We have an amazing recipe: the land, the climate, the know-how. The only ingredient we cannot supply ourselves is the one that matters most, water from above.

But what happens when the water does not come? This year, every Idahoan knows the answer firsthand. A few numbers that confirm what we are already living:

- 2025–26 was Idaho's 2nd warmest winter since 1896; only 1933–34 was warmer.
- As of April 1, snowpack across Idaho was the lowest on record.
- The reservoir system has only a 5% chance of filling this year.
- Of Idaho's 24 distinct water basins, 19 are forecast to be in drought, and four are expected to reach exceptional drought.

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COVER: See page 4 for a story on why Idaho wheat acres are holding steady while U.S. wheat acres continue to decline. Photo by Brandon McKay

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As U.S. wheat acres hit record low, Idaho holds steady

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – As total U.S. wheat acres have continued to decline for the past three decades, Idaho wheat acres have remained stable.

Before 1996, this country's total wheat, corn and soybean acres were about the same every year, ranging between 62 million and 71 million each. But since then, soybean and corn acres have continued to increase, while wheat acres have headed the other direction.

Except in Idaho.

The state's farmers plant about 1.2 million acres of wheat each year.

According to USDA's March 31 Prospective Planting report, U.S. farmers plan to plant 95 million acres of corn and 85 million acres of soybeans in 2026.

The nation's farmers plan to plant 44 million acres of wheat, down 3 percent from last year and, if realized, it will be the lowest U.S. wheat acreage since records began in 1919.

Meanwhile, Idaho farmers plan to plant 1.24 million acres of wheat this year, up 2 percent from 1.22 million acres last year.

"Acres planted to wheat in Idaho have remained steady over the past 40 or so years, even as wheat acres have been replaced by soybeans and corn across the country," says Britany Hurst Marchant, executive director of the Idaho Wheat Commission.

Why is this happening?

For starters, Idaho is not a soybean state and most of the corn grown here – about 350,000 acres per year – goes to feed for dairies.

It's also due to the fact that wheat is an essential rotation crop throughout much of the state, says Burley farmer Wayne Hurst, a member of the wheat commission.

Wheat breaks up the disease and wheat cycle for other major crops in Idaho, such as potatoes, sugar beets, alfalfa and dry beans, he says. It also adds organic matter to the soil.

"It's a great rotation crop. It fits well in Idaho," Hurst says.

"It may not be the cash crop on the farm, but wheat allows crop protection tools to be used on other crops, restoring to the soil the nutrients other crops pull from it," Marchant says.

"Wheat is an excellent rotation to high-value crops like potatoes and sugar beets," says North Idaho farmer Bill Flory. "Wheat's a really good fit in Idaho."

Idaho's roughly 2,600 wheat farmers typically produce about 100 million bushels of wheat per year and the quality is consistent, which makes the state an attractive place for national and internation markets, Flory says.

"Idaho farmers know how to grow a consistent, quality wheat crop and the market realizes that," he says.

Idaho wheat industry leaders say the fact that soybeans and corn have genet-

Photo by Bill Schaefer

"Idaho farmers know how to grow a consistent, quality wheat crop and the market realizes that."

– Bill Flory, Idaho farmer

ically modified (GMO) traits is a major reason those crops have outpaced wheat acres in the United States.

Corn and soybean varieties with GMO traits were commercially released in 1996, but there are no commercial GMO wheat varieties.

Because crops with GMO traits can be easier and more profitable to grow, they say, it makes corn and soybeans more attractive to many farmers in areas where all three crops can be grown. In addition, they add, GMO corn and soybeans have expanded the geographic area that can produce those crops, so they have become options to farmers who historically only grew wheat.

Idaho also has a higher percentage of its wheat crop under irrigation than any other state.

Add in southern Idaho's dry desert climate, which keeps disease and pest issues to a minimum compared to many other wheat-producing areas.

Wheat is grown in 42 of Idaho's 44 counties and ranks as the state's No. 2 crop, behind potatoes, when it comes to farm-gate receipts, which is the revenue a farmer receives for their commodity.

In most years, Idaho leads the nation or ranks No. 2 in average wheat yields.

Idaho usually ranks between No. 5 and No. 7 nationally in total wheat production and five of the six classes of wheat are grown in Idaho.

There are a lot of factors that keep wheat acres consistent in Idaho, Flory says.

Mostly though, Marchant says, "the success of Idaho's wheat crop is a direct result of investments of farmer assessment dollars into research, breeding, and variety development. Those investments have returned to farmers the ability to grow more wheat using less land, fewer resources, and fewer inputs without sacrificing quality in any way."

Favorable climatic conditions in Idaho, coupled with an adequate and mostly predictable supply of irrigation water from the state's reservoir systems, make the state a great place to produce wheat, industry leaders say.

Idaho has more acres of wheat grown under irrigation than any other state in the country "and the state's dryland areas generally receive enough moisture through precipitation to produce a really nice crop of wheat," Marchant says.

Because of this, Idaho typically has the highest wheat yields in the country, she says. According to USDA, Idaho's average wheat yield in 2025 was 93.5 bushels per acre – the state's record is 96.6 bushels per acre – while the average U.S. wheat yield last year was 53.3 bushels per acres.

All of these factors combine to make Idaho a consistent supplier of quality wheat and the market knows that, Flory says.

"The reliability and superiority of Idaho's wheat crop keeps the domestic and overseas demand high for Idaho wheat, and that is entirely because of farmer investments in market development, research, and wheat breeding, and the farmer's complete commitment to growing the very best wheat that can be grown," Marchant says.

The bottom line is that Idaho farmers put out a high-quality crop that's in demand, Hurst says.

"Wheat's just been a steady influence throughout Idaho for the last 100 years or so," he says. ■

DUVALL

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To find out whether farmers have what they need for this growing season, our team went straight to the source. In just nine days, more than 5,700 farmers from every state and Puerto Rico responded to a Farm Bureau survey on fertilizer costs, and the results speak for themselves.

Seventy percent of farmers who responded to the survey say they won't be able to afford all the fertilizer they need this year. Many are already making tough decisions by cutting back on fertilizer use or reducing planted acres altogether. When that happens, we risk lower yields and less food moving through the supply chain.

This struggle is driven by factors far beyond the farm gate. Global disruptions have tightened fertilizer supplies and driven up costs. At the same time, fuel prices continue to rise, further tightening our balance sheets.

Farmers are price-takers. We don't get to set what we earn, but no matter the returns, we still have bills to pay. And right now, those bills are getting harder to cover. It's no surprise that 94% of farmers from our survey say their financial situation has worsened or stayed the same compared to last year. Farm families have been facing tightening margins for years, and the pressure is only building.

Farm Bureau's grassroots in action

What gives me hope is the strength of our Farm Bureau family across our federation. They quickly came together to tell this story. Our staff at the national and state level stepped up to build the survey and get it out the door, and our grassroots responded, sharing real-time feedback from thousands of farmers across the country.

Our team went to work, digging into the numbers to make sure we captured a clear and accurate picture of what farmers are facing. Then we packaged it up for media and generated nearly 250 articles in 24 hours and more than 500 articles in a few days. That's the strength of our federation.

When farmers need a voice, we make sure it's heard. This survey is a direct result of that effort, and it's helping us deliver a clear message to policymakers about what's happening in the countryside.

Turning farmers' stories into action

Now, we're taking these results to leaders in Congress and the administration. Farmers need reliable access to fertilizer and tools to manage rising costs. That means strengthening supply chains, ensuring products can move efficiently and providing support when global disruptions ripple through the farm economy.

That also means providing certainty for farmers and ranchers across the country by passing a new, modernized farm bill. Because when volatility like this sends farmers on a roller coaster ride, farm bill programs are the steadying force farmers rely on.

Decisions like the one I made on my farm shouldn't be the norm. Farmers are used to making tough calls, but we need policies that ensure we can keep producing the food, fiber and renewable fuel that American families rely on. With the strength of our grassroots behind us, we'll keep working to make sure agriculture's voice is heard. ■

DORSEY

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their name on a ballot deserves appreciation for their willingness to serve.

The results of any election reflect the hard work of both candidates and voters alike.

This year, the majority of candidates supported by Idaho Farm Bureau Federation's Political Action Committee were successful, and we are grateful for those outcomes. But not all of them were victorious.

For those candidates who fell short, I think it is important to recognize something: The same amount of effort went into those campaigns as the ones that succeeded. The same late nights. The same hard conversations. The same commitment. The same hope.

And if we are being honest, that feeling of disappointment and discouragement probably sounds familiar to many Idaho farmers right now.

As we move through the spring of 2026, many producers across our state are facing a season that has tested them physically, emotionally, and financially. Input costs remain high. Markets remain uncertain. In many cases, no crops are penciling out. Yet we planted anyway. Because that is what farmers do.

We plant seeds even when conditions are uncertain. We invest in a crop long before we know what the outcome will be. We make the best decisions we can with the information we have, and then we place the rest in hands far bigger than our own.

And sometimes, despite doing everything right, the crop still does not reflect our effort.

Weather changes. Markets shift. Conditions deteriorate. This spring, many producers have watched crops struggle before they ever really had a chance. It is discouraging. It is frustrating. And frankly, it hurts.

But as IFBF CEO Zak Miller has said, if we don't plant, we can't be farmers.

The seeds do not grow in the bag.

If we never plant, we guarantee there will be no harvest. If

candidates never run, there can be no victories. If voters never participate, there can be no representation. Trying does not guarantee success, but refusing to try guarantees failure before the work even begins.

That does not mean we have to pretend difficult circumstances are easy.

We do not need forced optimism right now. Some situations simply are hard. It is okay to feel frustrated, discouraged, angry, or exhausted by the cards we have been dealt this growing season.

Farmers are realistic people. We understand setbacks because we live them. We know what it feels like to put everything you have into something and still come up short of what you hoped for.

But one of the greatest strengths of Farm Bureau has always been community.

As Farm Bureau members, we understand each other because we live many of the same realities. We may not be able to control the weather. We may not be able to erase financial losses. We may not be able to change election outcomes. Sometimes we go through all the hard work, make all the right decisions, and still find ourselves facing outcomes we never wanted.

There are moments in life where we cannot fix the problem for one another.

But we can stand beside each other through it.

We can listen. We can encourage. We can check in on neighbors. We can remind one another that setbacks do not define us. We can lean on the community that organizations like Farm Bureau provide during seasons exactly like this one.

Because there is a difference between losing and failing.

As Simon Sinek said, "There is a difference between losing and failing. Losing reflects the score. Failing reflects our attitude."

That quote may sting a little right now. But there is truth in it.

A disappointing crop does not make you a failure. A lost election does not make someone's campaign meaningless. Setbacks are not proof that the effort was wasted. Often, they are simply part of the tuition we pay for future success.

Agriculture teaches us that lesson over and over again.

Trials test us, but they also strengthen us. We do not grow without adversity. Character is built in difficult seasons, not easy ones. And if there is one thing Idaho agriculture has always proven, it is resilience.

So to those who ran for office: Thank you for trying.

To those who supported candidates: Thank you for engaging.

To those who planted crops despite uncertainty: Thank you for believing in another season.

And to those who are discouraged right now, whether in the field or after an election result, understand this: If the outcome was not what you hoped for, that does not mean you failed.

You planted the seed.

And without planting the seed, there is never a chance for harvest.

Brighter days are ahead. Better crops will come. Opportunities will return. And the lessons learned through difficult seasons will prepare us for what comes next.

That is how agriculture works.

And that is how strong communities like the Idaho Farm Bureau endure. ■

MILLER

Continued from page 2

On April 13, Idaho Department of Water Resources Director Mathew Weaver issued an emergency drought declaration, and Gov. Brad Little approved it, for all 44 counties in Idaho—every single one.

Our agricultural recipe is exceptional, but it won't work without water, and there is no substitute. Claims about who is or isn't modifying the weather are a conversation for another day. So let us be honest about what humans actually can and cannot do with water.

Ultimately, humans have mastered exactly three things when it comes to water:

1. How to distribute it (look at an irrigation ditch or turn on your faucet).
2. How to store it (dams and the aquifer, and we need more of the former and more water in the latter).
3. How to pull a tiny amount more from a storm. Cloud seeding can extract an additional 5% to 15% of moisture from a storm already in progress.

Human ingenuity with water is genuinely remarkable; without it, most of us would not live in Idaho or the West.

We can move it, store it, and with cloud seeding coax a few extra percentage points out of a passing storm —remarkable gifts, all of them — and still they are not enough.

There is one chasm none of it can cross: No human can create water. No investment, policy, or innovation can make it rain or snow. When the moisture doesn't fall, all of our ingenuity stands helpless before that humbling fact.

That brings us to the oldest and most powerful weather modification tool ever known: prayer. Farmers and ranchers, as tough, creative, and gritty as any people on earth, are often the first to acknowledge the limits of human power and the need for something far greater.

When you see a farmer with dirty knees this year, they may well have been checking their crops. But don't rule out the possibility that they were humbly asking God for the one thing no legislation, no reservoir, and no cloud-seeding program can provide: rain.

Would it hurt any of us to do the same? ■

Country Chuckles

By Jonny Hawkins

"You better start eating. That was *my* tummy rumbling."

I know you say I need **life insurance,** but **do I *really?***

Yes! While the reasons for having life insurance vary from person to person, coverage is a smart move no matter what stage of life you're in. **Talk to your Farm Bureau agent about the many ways life insurance can help protect you and your loved ones.**

Farm Bureau® INSURANCE
A FARM BUREAU SERVICE IN IDAHO

Photo by Sean Ellis

Potatoes are harvested in a southeastern Idaho field. North American Potato Market News estimates that total Idaho spud acres will decrease by 5 percent this year.

Idaho potato acres forecast to decline 5 percent

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Idaho potato acres could be down this year, according to spud growers who are facing high input costs and low farm-level potato prices well below the cost of production.

At least they should be down this year, those growers say.

"I expect acres to be less than last year," says American Falls spud farmer Jim Tiede.

"I think they'll be down for sure," says Aberdeen spud farmer Ritchey Toevs.

In the April 2 edition of North American Potato Market News, owner Ben Eborn projects Idaho potato acres will be down 5 percent this year compared with 2025. If that is correct, it means Idaho farmers will plant 300,000 acres of spuds in 2026, down from 315,000 last year.

Idaho farmers planted 315,000 acres of potatoes in 2024 and 330,000 acres in 2023.

NAPMN expects U.S. farmers will plant 24,000 fewer

potato acres this year, which would be 3 percent less than last year.

"The largest reduction is expected in Idaho," the potato market news report states.

Tiede thinks the 5 percent estimate by NAPMN is a conservative one.

"I think it's going to be more," he says. "I think it's going to be a big correction."

Eborn says several factors are behind this year's estimate of reduced U.S. potato acres.

"Growers across the country are extremely concerned about current market conditions, rising production costs, the lack of profitable alternative crops, the ability to obtain financing, increasing global competition, and limited irrigation water supplies," he wrote in NAPMN. "In addition, North American growers also have a huge supply of potatoes from the 2025 crop in storage."

Open-market potato prices are particularly bad right now and the industry desperately needs an acreage reduction to help better manage the supply and demand situation, says Hammett farmer Nick Blanksma.

He hopes potato acres are down significantly this year but is not holding his breath that they actually will be.

"I would be pleasantly surprised if Idaho growers planted 5 to 8 percent fewer acres this year, but I don't think they will," he says.

"The industry needs Idaho growers to plant less acres," he adds. "That's why the market is the way it is; there's too much supply."

According to NAPMN's Grower Return Index, open-market Idaho potatoes are selling for less than $2 per hundred pounds right now. That is far below the cost of production.

With 2026 shaping up to be a challenging water supply year in Idaho, water availability will be a major factor this year in how many acres of spuds farmers plant, Tiede says.

Tight water supplies should have farmers thinking about less water-intensive crops, like grains, he says. That said, he adds, the price situation for other crops isn't much better than it is for potatoes right now.

But it costs a lot more to plant potatoes than it does to plant grains.

"This $2 spud market has got to make a few people think about an alternative crop," Tiede says. "The price of wheat's not much better, but at least you won't lose as much."

NAPMN estimates total U.S. spud acres at 878,000 this year, down from 902,000 last year, 932,000 in 2024 and 966,000 in 2023. If the 2026 estimate is correct, it would be the smallest U.S. potato acreage since 1952.

"Nevertheless, if the U.S. produces a trendline yield, like it did last year, this year's expected acreage reduction may not be enough to significantly improve prices for open-market potatoes," Eborn writes.

He estimates that Idaho growers would need to cut at least 20,000 acres of fresh potatoes to significantly improve open-market prices.

Some growers are hopeful but skeptical that will happen.

"Nothing seems to be pointing to a big reduction. I hope I'm wrong," Toevs says.

USDA will publish its first estimate of U.S. potato acres at the end of June.

"We offer our projections as a substitute, for those who need to make plans for the upcoming season before USDA publishes its first potato acreage estimate," Eborn writes. "Actual acreage may deviate from the projection for several reasons, including planting conditions, late changes in contract volumes, terms, and pricing, as well as grower reactions to this and other reports on planting intentions."

Eborn says the NAPMN "forecast for Idaho's 2026 potato area may be on the low side, depending on how many acres of uncontracted potatoes growers choose to plant." ■

Wildlife-friendly fencing benefits antelope and livestock

By Steve Stuebner

The Butte Soil and Water Conservation District has been working with local landowners, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and many other partners to install wildlife-friendly fencing along U.S. 26 to benefit a major antelope migration corridor, big game, sage grouse and livestock.

Since 2021, landowners and partners have installed more than 100 miles of wildlife-friendly fence while removing more than 60 miles of old, standard barbed-wire livestock fencing.

Additional partners include the National Park Service at Craters of the Moon National Monument, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Bureau of Land Management, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The Butte District and NRCS staff in Arco have been really instrumental in making the project go," said Randy Purser, chairman of the Butte District. "It's been a huge success because the landowners have really stepped up to participate. We're doing as much as we can every year, with the money we have, and we've got a waiting list of more landowners who want to participate in the future."

In 2025, NRCS obligated $709,125 for the wildlife friendly fencing program covering 10 contracts with landowners through its Big Game Initiative. Partner agencies also contributed $150,000 to the project in the current year.

Photo courtesy National Park Service

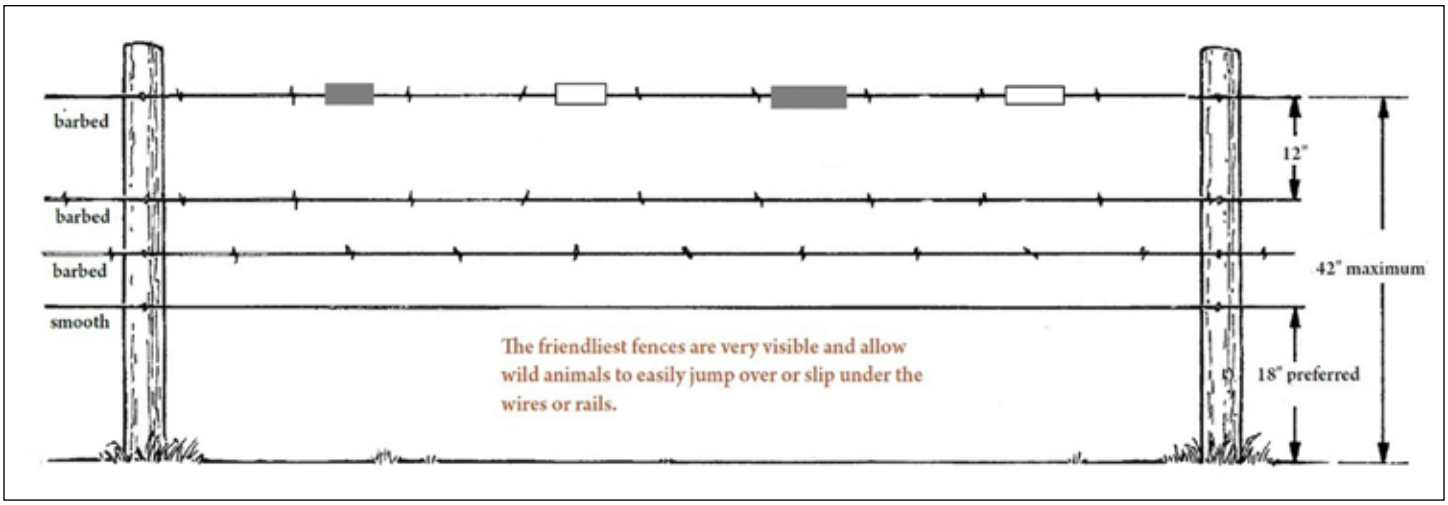
Pronghorn antelope on the move during their migration to lower elevations in the late fall.

The new fencing is being built on the north side of U.S. 26 from the Craters of the Moon National Monument area to Arco, and on the south side of the highway from Arco to the antelope winter range area, south of Howe.

Carson Kelly, a rancher from the Darlington area in the Big Lost River Valley, was an early adopter in the fencing project, getting involved in 2021. The opportunity to build new fencing along the south side of U.S. 26, east of Arco, provided a more solid control point for managing his cattle on federal grazing allotments in that area.

Previously, the fencing along the south side of the highway was in poor condition or did not exist, Kelly said.

"I think I've put in more wildlife-friend-



ly fencing than any other landowner in Butte County," he said. "The new fencing keeps my cattle on the south side of the highway, so I don't get calls anymore about my cattle being on the highway in the middle of the night. Or, I'd get calls about 50 cows out grazing on the lawn at the highway rest area."

The new fencing allows his cattle to utilize the rangelands much better than they did before, he said. "It spreads out the cows much better. Now my cows are well-distributed in the allotment, and they're only using about 40 percent of the grass. It's better for my cows long-term, and it's better for the range long-term. It's definitely been an improvement."

Several key initiatives led to a strong buy-in from the Butte District, NRCS and landowners in the fencing project.

1. A ground-breaking research project in 2009, funded by the Lava Lake Institute for Science and Conservation and the Wildlife Conservation Society, confirmed that antelope migrated from the Pioneer Mountains, out south to the north edge of the Craters of the Moon National Monument lava fields, then onto the vast, 89-square-mile Idaho National Laboratory property in the Arco desert, east of Howe.

Round trip, the migration route is approximately 160 miles long. The migration "ranks among the farthest for any land mammal in the Western Hemisphere," researchers said in a news release published on National Geographic online at the time.

2. That led The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to work on putting together an extensive series of conservation easements with private landowners and ranchers in the Pioneer Mountains. The conservation easements would ensure that antelope could migrate from national forest lands to the north, through private lands to the south, to the Craters property, INL and other lands in the Arco desert safely during the winter.

At last count, TNC has worked with private landowners to protect more than 100,000 acres of private ranchland rich with water and wildlife values particularly for sage grouse and antelope over the last 20 years. The lands remain as working ranches, but there are provisions in the contracts that protect wildlife habitat and migration corridors.

Submitted photo

The Butte Soil and Water Conservation District has been working with local landowners and many other partners to install wildlife-friendly fencing along U.S. 26.

In essence, TNC and the Pioneers Alliance pieced together a giant jigsaw puzzle of private, state and federal lands into a cohesive, functioning whole for wildlife and livestock.

3. In 2021, the NRCS launched a new Big Game Initiative program through the farm bill that provided funding to benefit wildlife migration corridors and other wildlife habitat projects nationwide. The local NRCS staff in Arco applied for funding to assist with installing wildlife-friendly fencing on the north side of U.S. 26, and removing old, antiquated fencing.

NRCS worked with a collaborative team of the Butte District, agency officials and landowners in local working groups to develop fencing projects, beginning in 2022. They are continuing to work together on new fencing areas each year.

The NPS, NRCS, BLM, IDFG, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are all contributing funds to the project. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation has contributed more than $100,000 to the project as well.

"We are putting real dollars into making things safer for migrating big game animals," said Jesse Fullmer, NRCS team lead in Arco. "This project dovetails real well with the previous conservation work that's been done in the Pioneers. We're trying to keep the animals moving fluidly through the different land ownerships when it comes time for them to migrate to winter range or vice versa.

Previously, NRCS had tried to work with landowners to improve wildlife habitat and water developments in the migration corridor to keep them away from cash crops, but that didn't work very well, Fullmer said. "The landowners didn't want the wildlife to become habituated to coming down and foraging on private lands to facilitate their migration. The fencing approach is working much better."

How many antelope are involved?

The antelope herds that benefit from the

Photo courtesy of IDFG

Wildlife-friendly fencing includes special reflective markers on the top strand that alert sage grouse and big game animals that they're approaching a fence in the daytime and at night.

"I think a lot of it is the positive PR that we're getting from the project. It's important to note that the fencing is beneficial for the landowners too. It's a win-win project for everybody."

– Randy Purser, Butte Soil and Water Conservation District

fencing project descend to lower elevations in the late fall from the Pioneer Mountains, Big Lost, Little Lost, Birch Creek and Medicine Lodge Creek areas, according to IDFG officials.

"We call it a big mixing pot," said Brett Gullet, an IDFG habitat biologist.

In terms of sheer numbers, more than 2,500 antelope migrate to INL areas east of Howe for the winter. Elk and mule deer also benefit from the fencing project as they also migrate out of the mountains to winter range in the Arco desert.

The specifications on the wildlife-friendly fencing allow for antelope to pass underneath the fences, as they like to do. The bottom strand of the fencing is smooth, and it's 18 inches above the ground. The next strand is 24 inches above ground, then 30 inches, and the top wire is 42 inches above the ground.

The space between the top wire and the 2nd strand is wide enough that the hoofs or legs of elk and deer do not get stuck between the top wires of the fencing.

"The elk have no trouble going over a 42-inch-high fence," Kelly said. "The antelope seem to flow through just fine as well. When they're on the move in the spring, I see them out there every day, moving single file through the countryside."

The new fence dimensions also work well to contain his cattle, Kelly said.

Landowners receive funding for installing the fencing projects; they can do the work themselves or contract it out. "I've done about one-third of it myself, and when it gets too hard and nasty in the rocks, I'll hire someone else to install it," Kelly said.

Idaho Fish and Game has set up volunteer opportunities for people from Idaho Falls, Arco and elsewhere to work on removing old, antiquated fencing, officials said. IDFG has a skid steer with a large spool to roll up the old barbed wire and dispose of it in a safe place.

Craters of the Moon officials have hired Utah Conservation Corps crews to help with installing wildlife fencing in the challenging lava rock areas. "They have been an awesome partner," Fullmer said.

Landowner buy-in has been strong because of the Butte District's involvement, TNC's previous work with landowners on the Pioneer Mountains conservation easements, NRCS local working group collaborative meetings, and the benefits that landowners get by installing new fencing that also keeps their cattle in the right place.

"I think a lot of it is the positive PR that we're getting from the project. It's important to note that the fencing is beneficial for the landowners too," Purser said. "It's a win-win project for everybody." ■

(Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.)

2026 SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS

Congratulations

Ag Winners Received $4,000!!

Wyatt Moura
Washington County

Liberty Simper
Ada County

Idaho Farm Bureau

Ruby Jordan
Bannock County

CJ Day
Clark County

Tymber Billman
Jefferson County

Non-Ag Winners Received $3,000!!

Payton Chandler
Washington County

Leah Schauerhamer
Fremont County

Addisyn Vanderwall
Idaho County

Brooklynn Irick
Clark County

Adalyn Pearson
Twin Falls County

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CASE IH

Hemp acres down significantly in Idaho

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Hemp is down in Idaho right now, but it's not out.

Idaho hemp acres have fallen significantly since reaching a high in 2024. That's due to the usual suspect: supply has outpaced demand, for now. Until demand catches up, acres will likely continue to remain depressed.

2022 was the first year that Idaho farmers were allowed to grow hemp, under tight guidance from the Idaho State Department of Agriculture. That year, the state's farmers grew 458 acres of hemp. In 2023, that number increased to 1,248 and in 2024, Idaho hemp acres reached a high of 1,860.

Last year, though, as supply piled up, hemp acres in Idaho declined to 1,242 and this year, as of May 12, Idaho farmers had notified the ISDA that they intended to plant only 233 acres of the crop.

The only hemp processing facility in Idaho right now is Idaho Hemp Processing in Rexburg.

Howe farmer Travis McAffee, who grew hemp two years ago, will not grow hemp this year. The reason is simple: He can't get a contract from IHP to grow hemp, like he did before.

"The reason I haven't regrown it (since 2024) is just the contracts," McAffee said. "The plant there in Rexburg … can't move it fast enough."

He said he would definitely grow hemp again, if the supply and demand situation changes.

"Yes, I would grow it again because it's a crop that uses less water than my malt barley did," McAffee said. "It's a nice crop to put in the rotation. Out here in the Little Lost, all we can do is small grains like wheat and malt barley, and hay. So, when this was another crop we could bring into the area, it made it nice."

For now, hemp is a niche crop in Idaho. For example, Idaho farmers typically grow about 1.2 million acres of hay, 1.2 million acres of wheat, 300,000 acres of potatoes, 540,000 acres of barley, 350,000 acres of corn and 170,000 acres of sugar beets, every year.

For hemp to become a major or even medium crop in Idaho, McAffee said, will require more demand and more processing capacity.

He said hemp in Idaho is not in trouble, it's just going through a typical supply-and-demand cycle right now, as all agricultural commodities do.

TOP: **Hemp is harvested in a field near Howe last year.** Submitted photo
RIGHT: **A hemp plant is shown in this submitted photo.** National Hemp Association photo

Mattie Mead, the owner of Hempitecture in Jerome, agrees. His facility uses industrial hemp processed from Idaho Hemp Processing and from IND Hemp in Montana to create high-performance building materials such as insulation.

He said he's hopeful that hemp acres will rebound in Idaho because the crop grows well in Idaho's climatic conditions.

"I think Idaho's got the right climate. I think the (ISDA's) protocol … is fair and balanced. I think we have the right ingredients for success in Idaho. It's going to take time," he said. "I wouldn't be surprised if we see a cycle where there's a reduction in acreage and the following year there's an increase in acreage and the following year a reduction."

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.

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.

Idaho became the last state in the nation to adopt a hemp program and legalize the production and processing of industrial hemp.

The legislation is a narrow bill and only allows for people to grow and process industrial hemp if they obtain a license from the Idaho State Department of Agriculture. People can also transport it on behalf of someone with a license.

The 2018 farm bill established industrial hemp as cannabis containing no more than 0.3% THC, the psychoactive compound associated with marijuana.

Federal regulations, however, recognize that environmental and growing conditions can affect THC levels and therefore provide growers some flexibility by not automatically considering a crop to be in violation of federal law unless it exceeds 1% THC, provided the producer acted reasonably and in compliance with approved growing and testing requirements.

"Idaho farmers know how to grow a crop and if anyone can figure it out, they can."

– Braden Jensen, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

Until this year's legislative session, Idaho maintained a stricter standard that did not provide farmers the same regulatory flexibility available under the federal program. Beginning July 1, however, Idaho producers will operate under a framework much more closely aligned with federal regulations following the legislature's passage of House Bill 772.

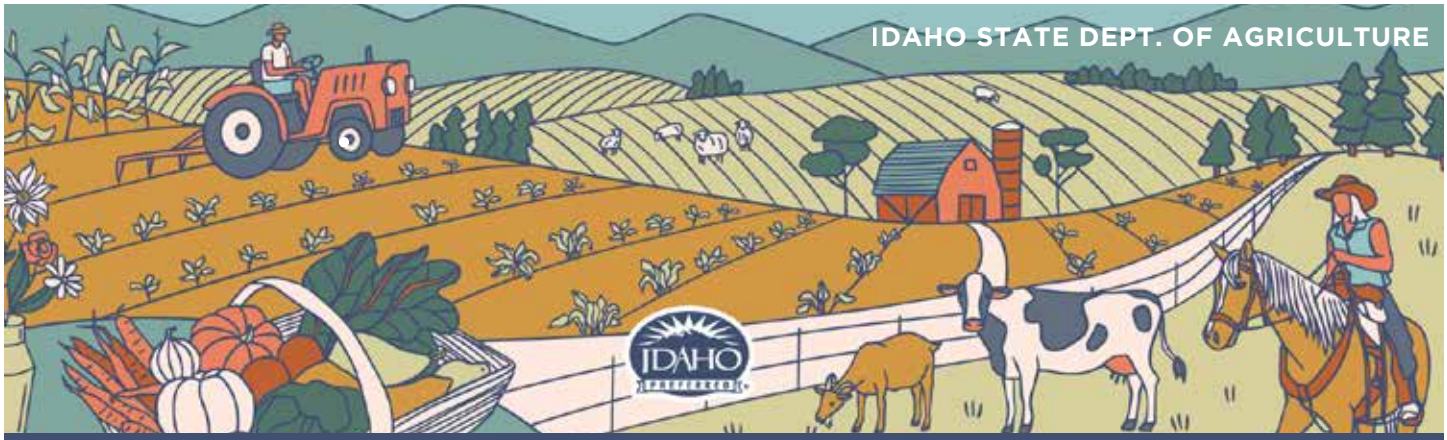
According to experts, it is near impossible to get high from industrial hemp.

According to ISDA, Idaho has the strictest hemp standards in the country.

Braden Jensen, director of governmental affairs for Idaho Farm Bureau Federation, helped craft the bill that established Idaho's hemp program.

He said hemp is still basically a new crop in Idaho and a small group of growers is trying to figure it out and literally plowing its future in Idaho.

"While the state's hemp acres have fallen since reaching a high in 2024, the crop is by no means dead in Idaho," he said. "Idaho farmers know how to grow a crop and if anyone can figure it out, they can. I think hemp will continue to take baby steps in Idaho as farmers continue to pioneer the crop's future here." ■



DISCOVERING IDAHO AGRICULTURE: HELPING CONSUMERS FIND AGRITOURISM EXPERIENCES

A family pulls off the highway after spotting a farm stand sign. Children run through a sunflower field. Visitors pick berries at a U-pick orchard, explore a greenhouse, or stop at a local winery. These moments may look different, but they share something in common: they are all examples of agritourism. At its heart, agritourism creates opportunities for people to experience agriculture firsthand through activities that connect consumers to Idaho agriculture, local products, and the people behind them.

Agritourism is just one pathway within agriculture, but for operations that choose to participate, it can create memorable experiences and stronger consumer connections while helping visitors better understand where their food comes from.

Idaho is seeing growth in this area. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, Idaho agritourism generated nearly $16.9 million in income in 2022, representing an 83% increase since 2017, highlighting the growing opportunities surrounding agricultural experiences across the state.

DID YOU KNOW:
Idaho ranked 5th nationally in agritourism income per operation.

To support participating operations, Idaho Preferred®, a program of the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, is developing expanded agritourism resources designed to help consumers discover Idaho agriculture in new ways. The initiative will combine digital experiences, consumer advertising, printed guides, expanded directories, and discovery tools designed to showcase agritourism destinations and help visitors explore Idaho agriculture.

The resource will highlight experiences such as U-picks, Christmas tree farms, pumpkin patches, culinary experiences, wineries and fermented beverage trails, farm stands, flower farms, greenhouse experiences, seasonal events, and other agricultural destinations while also helping consumers identify Idaho-grown products available for direct purchase.

As Idaho Preferred expands these efforts, we are looking to identify producers currently offering agritourism experiences for future listings, guides, and promotional opportunities. If your operation offers agritourism activities or visitor experiences connected to agriculture, we would love to hear from you.

JOINING THE DIRECTORY & PROMOTION:
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Photo by John O'Connell

Beef carcasses hang in University of Idaho's new meat science laboratory.

U of I dedicates new meat science lab

By John O'Connell
University of Idaho

MOSCOW, Idaho –More than 300 supporters gathered April 10 to help dedicate a new University of Idaho meat science laboratory with ample space and modern technology to better serve the state's rapidly growing beef industry.

The 12,750-square-foot Meat Science and Innovation Center Honoring Ron Richard includes a Vandal Brand Meats storefront, a fabrication room, a further-processing room, two pass-through smokehouses, a product packaging area, a large classroom with audio-visual technology and an integrated test kitchen, among other amenities.

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation (IFBF) was a major financial backer of the project. IFBF's board of directors voted to donate $250,000 toward it.

"I think what got our board excited was the vision of what this facility and program would mean for the greater state of Idaho, specifically our livestock producers," said Zak Miller, IFBF chief executive officer. "As U of I's meat science program graduates these high-quality students, they will go back into rural Idaho and this will actually serve our producers on the ground."

IFBF President Matt Dorsey, a Canyon County farmer, noted several new meat processing facilities have opened throughout the state in recent years, and he said the new laboratory will fill a great need.

"It's amazing, it's state of the art, it's got all the bells and whistles, and it's streamlined having separate areas for harvesting and processing. It's going to be excellent," Dorsey said.

The new building replaces a 5,000-square-foot, 1960s-era facility where space was too limited to conduct multiple tasks simultaneously, which forced the meat sciences team to constant-

ly shuffle heavy equipment between rooms.

"The College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALS) is celebrating our 125th year this year — 125 years of leading, innovating, exploring and providing practical research-based information to our communities," said Leslie Edgar, J.R. Simplot endowed dean of CALS. "Facilities like this position us to continue our land-grant mission, both now and into the future."

Demand in Idaho has never been stronger for meat science professionals. The state is home to more than 8,100 cattle operations supporting 2.5 million head of cattle, valued at more than $2.6 billion.

"The students who graduate from here have a 100% job placement rate, and now they get to learn their craft in one of the best facilities in the country," U of I President Scott Green said. "This project offers another great example of what the U of I can accomplish when private partners, the state of Idaho and our own investments are combined."

Planning for the $17.5 million project started more than a decade ago, and several stakeholders contributed generous donations to make it possible. Discussions about the need for a new meat science facility were ongoing when Michael Parrella, former J.R. Simplot endowed dean of CALS, joined the university in February 2016.

"We've done some incredible work — great teaching, great research, great outreach and Extension — in the old facility, but there's no question that it was not a showplace," Parrella said. "The meat science program, which is a signature program here on campus, should have the physical aspects that reflect the quality, size and importance of the industry it's designed to serve."

Under Parrella's leadership, the college also launched capital projects to build several other facilities throughout the state. U of I opened a seed potato germplasm laboratory adjacent to the new meat science facility along an access road now dubbed Meat & Potatoes Lane in early 2022.

The Center for Plant and Soil Health at the U of I's Parma Research and Extension Center opened in March 2024. CALS researchers are in the process of commissioning the world's most advanced facility for deep-soil research, called the Deep Soil Ecotron, located in the JW Martin Laboratory on the Moscow campus. And later this year, CALS is set to open the nation's largest research dairy based in Rupert, called the Idaho Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment (Idaho CAFE).

The meat science facility's namesake, Ron Richard, was a longtime manager of Vandal Brand Meats who died in 2018. Richard's sons who attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony believe he would have been moved by the tribute to his legacy.

"He loved this entire program, and I believe this building shows how much he cared about all of this," his youngest son, Angus Richard, said. "As his sons, we're honored and grateful that this building is here and that it's named in his honor, and we're looking forward to the future that it's going to provide for everybody."

Tyrel Richard added, "He'd be honored and stoked for the new facility after working in that old one for so long and seeing how much it was needed." ■

How forests grow — succession

By Chris Schnepf
University of Idaho

Many forest owners enjoy watching their newly planted trees grow. But forests also change over longer time frames than that of any individual tree.

There are two broad ways of characterizing these changes. The first is forest species composition. The second is structure, which we will cover in my next column. Finally, we will have a third column devoted to one of the major drivers of forest change – disturbance.

Even if we do not plan to manage forests in exactly the ways they grew historically, it is vitally important to understand these natural processes so we can better understand current forest conditions relative to those developmental stages and make management decisions that sync with how those forests and trees have evolved to grow.

The first way to understand how forests grow and develop focuses primarily on species composition, a process called succession – the replacement of the biota (plants, animals, etc.) of an area over time.

Because trees are such a dominant presence in forest ecosystems, we usually describe forest successional changes relative to trees. The tree and understory plant species that occur on all but the end of this process are often called "seral species" or referred to collectively as "seral plant communities."

After a major disturbance, the first spe-

TOP: **Shade-tolerant species such as grand fir, cedar or hemlock dominate at the end of forest succession in northern Idaho forests.** BOTTOM: **Shade-intolerant species such as lodgepole pine usually start forest succession in Idaho.** Photo by Chris Schnepf

cies to take over a site (sometimes called "primary succession") are grasses, forbs, and shrubs (sometimes called "pioneer" or "early seral" species").

Many of these species fix nitrogen, which makes sense because hot fires can volatilize nitrogen, giving species such as fireweed, snowberry, alder, and other species which can fix nitrogen from the air an adaptive advantage. Tree seedlings are often present in these early successional stages, but other species are commonly more obvious.

This early stage of succession may only last 5-10 years – shorter when foresters plant promptly and reduce the shrubs and other competing plants. However, after a severe disturbance, especially on a harsh, dry site, the stage may last 40 years or more.

As the forest continues to develop, one of the major drivers of forest succession is shade from overstory trees. Trees eventually overtop and shade out many forbs and shrubs as they close canopy.

Typically shade-intolerant species such as larch and pines grow rapidly and dominate the site at this stage, even if more shade tolerant species are present. As the stand ages, these shade-tolerant trees often form a distinct layer in the lower part of the canopy.

As the stand continues to develop, tree-to-tree competition may be severe, resulting in some of the trees in the main canopy dying out. As overstory trees die, their growing space is eventually occupied by shade-tolerant trees in the near vicinity.

Moving forward in time, there typically is not enough light for shade-intolerant trees to reproduce in the understory, so shade-tolerant species become more prominent in a stand. This process culminates, barring more disturbance, with a climax forest, which is dominated in the overstory and the understory by the most shade-tolerant species capable of growing on the site (often called climax species).

Succession follows different paths, depending on a site's moisture, soil, and other factors. On a wetter site, succession might climax in a stand of cedar and hemlock trees. On a drier site, Douglas-fir might be the climax species.

The primary way we classify sites with these different successional pathways in Idaho are habitat types, which are broadly named for the most shade-tolerant trees capable of growing on the site.

In northern Idaho forests, it typically takes at least 200-400 years to go through the full cycle of succession. Succession rate is determined by disturbances, whether they be natural, such as various types of wildfire, or human causes such as a harvest.

Disturbances typically slow down succession. On the drier sites, frequent surface fires lengthened early-middle stages of succession by killing understory shade-tolerant species.

Historically, where forests reached the climax stage in Idaho, they usually did not last very long. A climax forest was often the last stage before a stand-replacing fire started succession all over again.

Logging effects on succession can vary. For example, a clearcut or seedtree harvest basically restarts the successional cycle. On the other hand, hi-grading (taking only trees that are merchantable) tends to speed up succession, purely in terms of species.

The non-merchantable trees in mature stands tend to be more shade tolerant. So, in a forest where the overstory is dominant to ponderosa pine with Douglas-fir in the understory, removing the overstory converts the stand from pine to Douglas-fir – a later successional stage for that site.

One of the greatest values in understanding forest succession is choosing which tree species to favor on a site. Climax forests play valuable roles in the larger forest landscape, especially for wildlife. But climax forests tend to be unstable on all but the wettest or driest sites.

They are often uniquely vulnerable to fire and drought cycles. We often try to manage for the seral species for a given site, as they are more resilient in the face of droughts, which are projected to be even worse as climate changes unfold.

Drought resilience also often tends to correlate with fewer insects and disease issues. For example, on sites where Douglas-fir or grand fir are the climax species, and they are currently the most common trees currently in the stand, we tend to have more insect and disease issues – especially root diseases.

So, if Douglas-fir is the climax species for a site, ponderosa tends to be favored. Where grand fir is climax, ponderosa pine and larch are commonly favored. On a moist site, (e.g., where cedar and hemlock are climax species), a broader range of species is more sustainable.

Understanding succession also helps us manage for other forest values. Animal, insect, and fungi species increase or decrease in response to the successional vegetation changes.

For example, cavity nesting wildlife species find more habitat in late-seral or climax stands. Other wildlife species need significant amounts of early seral habitat to thrive (elk, moose, similar ungulates rely on shrubs for food).

The best huckleberry picking is often on sites in an early seral stage of succession. For ecosystem functioning, it is often valuable to have a rich, connected mix of forests of different successional stages across broad landscapes. ■

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

U of I research tackles growing potato threat

Submitted photos

A potato shows symptoms of black dot disease, which is becoming increasingly prevalent.

By John O'Connell
University of Idaho

ABERDEEN – A University of Idaho scientist has published management recommendations based on a decade of research to help Idaho potato farmers protect their crops against an increasingly troublesome fungal disease called black dot.

Phillip Wharton, an associate professor of plant pathology, compiled findings from several black dot studies conducted from 2011 to 2022 into a single paper. The journal Plant Health Progress published the paper online on March 31.

Black dot is caused by the fungus Colletotrichum coccodes and is named for the abundant black dots that form on tubers, roots, stems and stolons, which are horizontal plant stems, commonly known as runners, that form clonal plantlets.

Symptoms appear late in the season, after the crop canopy fully covers the rows, a stage known as row closure.

Stem lesions typically form around the base of leaf petioles, which are the slender stalks that attach a leaf blade to a plant stem, and they begin as small brown spots and can grow together into larger lesions that may surround the stem. As lesions mature, they develop centers that range from circular to irregular in shape and appear white or straw-colored.

"For growers, the big takeaway is that black dot has to be managed in the field. By the time you see it in storage, the infection has already happened."

– Phillip Wharton, U of I associate professor

Based on his research, Wharton advises potato farmers to shorten their growing season to reduce black dot infections that appear in storage. His research shows this can be done without sacrificing yields.

"For growers, the big takeaway is that black dot has to be managed in the field," Wharton said. "By the time you see it in storage, the infection has already happened."

In response to rising demand among farmers for information about black dot, Wharton reexamined previously unpublished research and combined those findings with results of replicated fungicide field trials in 2021 and 2022.

The paper covers soil testing, cultural control methods, growing season length, storage practices and fungicide timing.

Wharton believes several factors may be causing increased problems for growers, including potentially fungicide-resistant strains, new potato varieties and outdated management and storage practices.

Black dot reduces potato quality, mars their appearance and can increase processing waste. It tends to be uniformly distributed throughout a field, and the fungus can remain viable in the field for up to a decade.

It produces spores on dead plant material in the soil during the spring and spreads via water droplets that splash on emerging plants.

"In the past couple of years, I noticed that I was being asked to present my work on black dot a lot more often, which suggests it's becoming more of an issue," Wharton said. "This is something we want to address: Why is it becoming more of an issue?"

In a 2011-12 project funded by the Idaho Potato Commission, Wharton adapted diagnostics developed in the United Kingdom for black dot detection for use in Idaho soil testing.

Wharton also began trials to determine how adjusting the length of the growing season affected how often black dot occurs and how severe it becomes. He planted fresh-market potato

Potato stems show symptoms of black dot disease.

varieties and harvested them between 100 and 130 days after half of the plants had emerged.

Though he saw no noticeable yield difference between the harvest dates, black dot was more common and more severe in the potatoes harvested after 120 days.

Among potatoes harvested between 100 and 110 days, 0-17% had noticeable levels of black dot, with symptoms covering 5-10% of the tuber surface. By contrast, about 55% of potatoes harvested after 120 days had black dot, with the disease covering 10-20% of the tuber surface.

In a 2012 soil survey of southern Idaho fields, nearly half of samples tested positive for black dot.

From 2012-22, Wharton conducted trials for managing black dot in the field and in storage. He and his research team discovered black dot does not spread in storage. Instead, potatoes that show symptoms in storage were infected before vine kill in the field.

Wharton advised growers to promptly cool potato cellars after loading them and carefully manage humidity to slow development of symptoms.

Based on data from his field trials conducted from 2018 through 2022, Wharton concluded fungicide applications early in the season are much more effective than those applied later. He found growers who apply fungicides between sprouting and when plants are 6 to 8 inches tall see better disease control and fewer storage problems.

Wharton saw similar results with all fungicides registered for black dot control, suggesting timing matters more than the specific product used.

Based on his many studies of Colletotrichum diseases in potatoes and other crops, Wharton suggests plants can naturally resist infection during early growth stages. After row closure — when plants stop growing and focus on tuber development — these defenses weaken.

This allows the pathogen to grow, infect stems and produce material that washes into the soil and infects developing tubers.

Wharton plans to share his black dot research in an Extension bulletin later this year. ■

National Barley Yield Contest debuts with a new U.S. record

By Sydney Anderson
Idaho Barley Commission

IDAHO FALLS – The inaugural year of the National Barley Yield Contest (NBYC) concluded with a new U.S. record, highlighting the productivity, innovation, and agronomic excellence of U. S. barley growers.

The 2025 contest marked the expansion of the program to a national scale, following a successful Idaho-based pilot year in 2024. While the contest opened nationally, all entries in the first year were submitted by Idaho growers. The 2025 results were announced this February.

Winning the national title for highest yield in the Irrigated Winter Barley division was Joey Wallace of Driscoll Brothers Partnership in Jerome County, who produced a new U.S. record of 256 bushels an acre with the variety Memento, surpassing his 2024 yield of 241 bushels an acre from the variety UT10201. Wallace's yield exceeded the Jerome County average by 175 percent, establishing a new global benchmark for barley production.

The Irrigated Spring Barley Division was won by Dustin Miller of Mix Miller Farms, also in Jerome County, who harvested 239 bushels an acre of Molson Coors variety, M-179. Miller's yield surpassed the county average by 182 percent, demonstrating exceptional agronomic management and precision technology.

Both Wallace and Miller are Scoular MVP growers. Scoular, which is a sponsor of the contest, covered entry fees for Barley MPV growers, an initiative that will continue for future program participants.

A standout feature of the contest remains the Percent Over County Average category, which ensures growers, regardless of region, have a fair opportunity to compete. Modeled after the National Wheat Yield Contest, this approach compares each grower's yield to their county's historical average, leveling the playing field much like a golf handicap system.

The diversity of climates, soils, and production systems across barley-growing regions makes this category essential, recognizing agronomic skill and adaptability—not just the highest absolute yield.

While no entries were submitted in the Spring Dryland Division, the category remains an important component of the contest as it expands nationally, offering dryland growers an opportunity to compete on management and efficiency.

Since Idaho growers were the only entrants in the inaugural national contest, Wallace and Miller earned both Idaho and national titles. Each winner received a paid trip for two to attend the Commodity Classic in San Antonio, Texas, in late February 2026.

Submitted photo

Joey Wallce, left, and Dustin Miller, pictured with their award plaques at the University of Idaho Eastern Idaho Cereal School in Idaho Falls, were recognized for their outstanding barley yield achievement.

Wallace credited his success to focusing on details within a grower's control and learning from high performing areas of the field.

"Sometimes we spend a lot of time trying to fix the poorest parts of our fields," Wallace said. "I think we should pay more attention to improving the best parts. I never dreamed a yield like that would come out of some areas of that field."

Miller emphasized both community pride and innovation.

"We were excited and proud to bring a yield like that back to our community," Miller said. "Having access to our state-of-the-art LEMKEN planter, played an important role in our success."

The Idaho Barley Commission coordinates the contest and encourages growers nationwide to participate as the program continues to expand.

LEMKEN, a founding sponsor of the contest, will provide an all-expense paid trip to Germany in November 2027 to Agritechnica—the world's largest ag show—for the 2026 national winners in the Irrigated Winter Barley and Irrigated Spring Barley divisions.

The IBC encourages growers nationwide to participate as opportunities within the National Barley Yield Contest continue to grow. Beyond existing awards, contest coordinators are actively pursuing additional sponsorships to support expanded winner opportunities, including travel and educational experiences tailored to different contest divisions.

The National Barley Yield Contest is designed to be accessible. In addition to support from growers' existing network of agronomists and field representatives, Brett Wilken of Scoular and I are available to help coordinate entries and answer questions throughout the contest.

Full 2025 NBYC results are now available on the IBC website. 2026 entry forms will soon be available at idahobarleycommission.org

For questions regarding entries or sponsorships, please contact me at Sydney.anderson@barley.idaho.gov or Wilken at bwilken@scoular.com. ■

USDA reinstates large U of I grant

University of Idaho news release

University of Idaho photo

Cattle graze cover crops in the Magic Valley.

MOSCOW, Idaho – The largest grant in the University of Idaho's history has been reinstated in its entirety after a year-long pause.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) notified officials with the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALS) and their partners in April that they may resume work on the five-year, $59 million Innovative Agriculture and Marketing Partnership (IAMP) program, which incentivizes farmers statewide to experiment with creative marketing strategies and resilient production practices.

More than 200 Idaho farmers representing 34 counties applied for incentives across seven commodities through the original IAMP program, which was approved in 2024 as part of USDA's Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities program.

However, USDA terminated IAMP in April 2025 based on new criteria that retroactively placed greater emphasis on helping producers access new market opportunities and increased the minimum percentage of funding awarded to farmers from half to 65% of the total.

The agency invited IAMP leaders to revise the program to meet the new standards and reapply, though the federal government shutdown further delayed the process.

The IAMP team, led by Erin Brooks, a professor in the Department of Soil and Water Systems, and Doug Finkelnburg, area Extension educator in cropping systems, plans to reengage with the original pool of growers before potentially accepting applications for new acres. Some growers had already received IAMP payments when the program was paused, while others on the list were still waiting for their application to be processed.

"We are going to get a technical support team to help us enroll these people, and we're streamlining the process so it's fairly straightforward and automated," Finkelnburg said. "Our hope is to get producers under contract in 2026 as quickly as we can."

Other IAMP partners include The Nature Conservancy, Desert Mountain Grass-Fed Beef and the Nez Perce and Coeur d'Alene tribes.

The revised version of IAMP designates $3.5 million for direct payments of up to $7,500 per year for participating producers to try specified marketing activities intended to capture a premium for crops raised using regenerative practices.

Another $450,000 is reserved for larger marketing projects, potentially involving groups of growers, or even businesses, to implement a marketing program.

IAMP will hire a marketing specialist, who will study outcomes of participants' marketing efforts, and three financial staff members.

Eligible IAMP practices include reduced tillage, cover cropping, prescribed grazing, intercropping, reducing use of synthetic fertilizers in favor of organic nutrient sources and biochar use.

Projects will involve major commodities produced in the state, including barley, beef, chickpeas, hops, potatoes, sugar beets and wheat.

"For a producer, this is an excellent opportunity to try things that you haven't tried before, that are high risk but potentially high reward," Brooks said. "From the industry perspective, they're looking at stewardship and they're looking at producing healthier foods from healthy soils. The markets want to know more information about this, and the more

we can provide tangible data and research that gives confident numbers on the impacts of these adopted practices, the better off we are."

Data from the project will help producers make informed decisions about how regenerative farming practices may affect their bottom line.

Research projects involving incentivized practices will continue at U of I research and Extension centers and the Coeur d'Alene Tribal Farm under the new IAMP program. However, some of the original research objectives, such as required on-farm soil sampling and in-field baseline comparisons, have been scaled back to direct more funding toward marketing efforts.

The revised IAMP program includes funding to hire five graduate students and a postdoctoral researcher to aid in implementation of the grant.

IAMP plans to host field events to show the public program practices on the ground throughout the state, and data generated through IAMP will be shared at grower meetings, field days, regional conferences and other events catering to Idaho farmers. IAMP research updates and farming decision support tools will also be posted at iamp.uidaho.edu.

The program aims to enable participating farmers to evaluate incentivized practices to adopt as part of their long-term management approaches.

"The practices we're incentivizing will help make the farms more resilient to risk," Finkelnburg said. "We're incentivizing practices that build soil carbon, increase water storage in soils and make it less risky to do production agriculture." ■

Submitted photo

University of Idaho staff, undergraduate and graduate researchers involved in a cover crop research project collect cover crop biomass samples from research trials on a commercial field in Genesee.

Study provides guidance for using cover crops in dryland wheat rotations

By John O'Connell
University of Idaho

MOSCOW, Idaho — A recent University of Idaho-led study conducted in collaboration with regional dryland wheat farmers provides guidance on when to terminate a spring-planted cover crop.

Cover crops, which are grown primarily to benefit soil health and fertility rather than for commercial sale, are becoming increasingly common on northern Idaho and eastern Washington farms.

However, little research has explored how they perform in local growing conditions and cropping systems.

Producers and researchers involved in U of I's three-year study, called the Pacific Northwest Cover Crop Decision Aid System (PaNDAS), evaluated how cover crops with varying species diversity affected soil moisture, as well as nitrogen and carbon levels, when killed at three different growth stages.

The farmers and scientists agreed that terminating cover crops in early to mid-bloom stages — which generally occur from late June through the first week of July depending on water availability — struck the right balance between

maximizing soil-health benefits and minimizing water consumption.

The early season termination date in low-precipitation areas, which occurred in early June, provided insufficient time for cover crops to make an impact. The late-season date, which occurred when seed pods started filling, around mid-July, used too much water to justify the additional cover crop growth in the study's driest growing areas.

In growing areas with heavier precipitation totals, the ideal termination date was closer to full bloom.

By the late-season termination date, farmers in wetter growing areas were concerned that some cover crop seeds had reached maturity and posed a threat of emerging as volunteers in subsequent commercial crops.

"It's a tremendous amount of new information we obtained in partnership with eight producers, who were co-principal investigators," said Sanford Eigenbrode, a distinguished professor emeritus in the Department of Entomology, Plant Pathology and Nematology, who was part of the PaNDAS research team.

"All of our producers want to keep going with this research," he said. "They want to learn more because they really enjoyed this experiment, they enjoyed the experience of collaborating with us and they learned things."

Farmers operating in three different rainfall zones in Genesee and Troy in Idaho, as well as Cloverland, St. John, Uniontown and Palouse in Washington — receiving annual precipitation of 10-12 inches, 14-18 inches or 18-22 inches — devoted 6 acres each toward replicated cover crop trials.

Trials, which were conducted in 2023 and 2024, compared a low-diversity mix containing a brassica, a grass and a legume against a high-diversity mix with three species from each genus. They also compared cover crop performance when terminating them in the early, mid and late season.

"We measured how much biomass cover crops produced and how much nitrogen and carbon were stored in that plant material," said Kendall Kahl, a PaNDAS team member who is an assistant professor in the Department of Soil and Water Systems (SWS). "We also measured soil nitrogen during the cover crop year and then again every six months for the next year and a half to see if we could measure some of that nitrogen from cover crops in the soil."

Cover crops replaced garbanzo beans in the crop rotation on farms in the wetter regions and were planted in place of summer fallow in the dry areas. Farmers planted winter wheat following cover crops.

The researchers found cover crops in all scenarios were effective at recapturing nitrogen that would have otherwise leached from fields, bringing it to the surface to slowly decompose over six months to two years, depending on conditions, and eventually become available for use by commercial crops.

"In our high-rainfall areas, those cover crops are holding about 70 pounds of nitrogen per acre in plant material that will become available at some point," Kahl said. "In our drier areas, we are seeing 45 to 50 pounds per acre of nitrogen in that cover crop biomass. The question is, when will it break down and show up in the soil?"

The second termination date also resulted in the ideal carbon-to-nitrogen balance in the cover crop biomass for soil microbes to convert organic nitrogen from cover crop foliage into inorganic forms accessible by commercial crops.

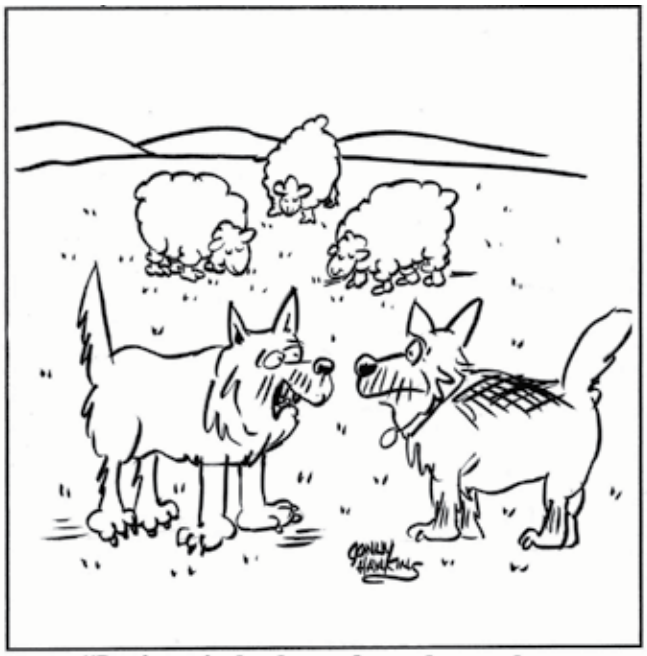
Species diversity seemed to have no effect on nutrient cycling and soil water availability, though high-diversity mixes attracted a much greater diversity of insects.

"If you're concerned about the cost of doing cover crops, I think this research shows that choosing a simple, less expensive mix will still give you a similar benefit in terms of nitrogen," Kahl said.

The researchers saw no yield gains following cover crops in any of their management approaches, but they believe that winter wheat yields could increase with a longer study.

"The cover crops use a little bit more water than what you are going to lose in fallow, but you get a significant amount of carbon and nitrogen and potentially other soil benefits from growing the cover crop," Kahl said. "We hope to continue this study to look more closely at how our cover crop management strategies impact soil health — in particular our soil arthropod and microbial populations, which the growers we're partnering with are interested to learn more about." ■

Country Chuckles
By Jonny Hawkins



"Let's switch places for a day and see if anyone notices."

Legendary White Horse of Black Daisy Canyon likely survived another winter

By Dianna Troyer
For Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

It's likely the beloved White Horse of Black Daisy Canyon made it through a mild winter in the Lost River Valley.

Since wandering away from a hunting camp three decades ago, he has been living alone in a scenic area near the Mackay Reservoir and has devotees statewide.

"The white horse is our legend," says Tayler Teichert, manager of the nearby 6X Ranch. "I always look for him when I'm moving cows through there. I have a video of him sunning himself up high near the trees in August, then saw him again in the fall. With our easy winter, I'm very hopeful he made it."

In the mid-1990s, the white horse was part of some elk hunters' pack string in Copper Basin and escaped from their camp. Local residents recall seeing him with a pack saddle, brass bell around his neck and hobbles. Eventually he rubbed off those remnants of civilization.

His admirers statewide cherish him as a symbol of rugged western individualism, self-reliance, and freedom. Local residents – content to admire him from afar –respect his privacy and leave him alone to live a solitary lifestyle.

During the past three decades, they have watched him turn from a dark dapple gray as a youngster to completely white, a natural progression of his genetic coloring.

Warren Trogden, a retired Bureau of Land Management employee, has seen him since 1995 when he started working for the agency as an equipment operator and maintenance worker.

"I saw him about a month ago," he said in mid-April.

RIGHT: **The White Horse of Black Daisy Canyon wandered away from a hunting camp in Copper Basin in 1995 and has lived alone near the Mackay Reservoir ever since.** Photo courtesy of Melissa Fowler

Photo courtesy of Jim McKelvey

The horse often grazes along the shore of the reservoir.

"I'm optimistic he's still there. Last fall, he still looked like he was in good shape."

Trogden often worked at the agency's campground on the east side of the reservoir and looked for the horse through a spotting scope on the hillside above the opposite shore.

"I still look for him when I'm down that way," said the Challis resident. "I usually see him in the mornings."

Another rancher, Bret Zollinger, saw the horse throughout the summer.

"With as light of a winter as we've had, I'm sure he did just fine," Zollinger said. "No one feeds him. He's totally on his own. It's amazing he's lived here all these years and has been fine."

Susie Morton, who lives at Chilly north of Mackay, rides for local ranchers when they need help and has seen the white horse for years.

"Last fall, I saw him a lot by the reservoir and so did others," Morton said. "I've always wondered where he spends the winter, whether it's along the river or where there's cover in the canyon. I can't believe he's survived this long with all the wolves in the area."

A former 6X Ranch manager, Mike Seal, remembers seeing the white horse whenever he was moving cattle.

"He was always just there watching us and keeping his distance," Seal said. "It's odd because most horses like to be with a herd, but he was comfortable by himself."

Even though they have not seen the horse, Twin Falls musicians Bruce Michael Miller and Heather Platts, known as Crazy Love Duo, were inspired to write a ballad about him after reading articles on the internet. Their song, "White Horse of Black Daisy Canyon" is part of a CD they produced two years ago.

They sing of how "he made his escape and captured our hearts."

The lone gelding also inspired Caldwell artist, Kayla Cuellar, who painted a watercolor of him, "Spirit of Lost River Valley," available at her website, kaylacuellarart.com.

To convey his desire for freedom and refusal to be domesticated, she painted an impressionistic watercolor of him with the bell that once dangled around his neck lying on the ground at his front hooves.

She admires the horse because "he doesn't fit in anyone's box or live up to others' expectations. He reminds me of my uncle who was a game warden in the valley."

Veterinarian Dr. Jeff Bennetts in Challis says the horse is capable of defending himself from predators. "The thing that will eventually weaken him is that his teeth will wear down as he ages, and he'll have a hard time grinding his forage."

Teichert said the White Horse of Black Daisy Canyon "is one of the things I love about Mackay. Since my family moved here in 2004, I always keep an eye out for him on my way to town. I love that he chose Mackay and Black Daisy Canyon to call home." ■

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Episode 107 - Watt's the Cost of Power?

As energy demand surges across Idaho, what does it mean for the farmers and ranchers who depend on affordable, reliable power?

We sit down with Eric Olsen, Partner at Echo Hawk & Olsen, to break down the growing strain on the grid, the rise of large energy users, and how it could impact irrigation, input costs, and the future of agriculture. It's a conversation that connects power lines to pivot lines.