

Idaho Farm Bureau Quarterly

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Preserving Farmland In Fast-Growing Idaho





Farmers set the course for 2026 policy

When farmers and ranchers come together, they don't just talk about challenges—they get to work finding solutions.

That's exactly what happened at our 107th American Farm Bureau Convention in Anaheim, California, where farmers from across the country gathered to set Farm Bureau's policy for the year ahead. That policy was shaped by real conversations about tight margins, rising costs, labor shortages and the uncertainty many farm families are facing right now.

As a farmer myself, I don't have to imagine those challenges. I see them firsthand. And I hear the same concerns everywhere I go. That's why Farm Bureau's 2026 policy is focused on making sure farmers have the tools, certainty and support they need to keep going—today and for generations to come.

2026 policy and the FARM 250 Vision

This year's policy discussions come at a significant moment as our nation approaches its 250th anniversary. This milestone also provides

See **DUVALL**, page 6

The President's Desk



By Matt Dorsey

President, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

Getting the conversation started

Farmland preservation has been a major goal and topic of discussion among Farm Bureau members for several decades.

It's nice to see that discussion start to occur among people outside of or on the periphery of agriculture.

Idaho Gov. Brad Little, himself a rancher and farmer, called a special governor's summit to deal with the issue of disappearing farmland.

The Governor's Summit on Agricultural Viability in Idaho was held Dec. 18 inside the

Capitol building and was attended by about 240 people. Another 85 or so followed it online.

The all-day event included farmers and ranchers, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation staff, legislators, members of academia and conservation groups interested in the topic and members of Idaho government agencies with a stake in preserving ag ground.

It was great to see that many people from a wide variety of groups and interests come

See **DORSEY**, page 6

Inside Farm Bureau



By Zak Miller

CEO, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

A hard question

The 2025 Idaho Farm Bureau annual meeting in December featured exceptional speakers covering diverse topics. With such talented presenters, I suspect participants' favorite presentations aligned more with their personal interests than any single speaker's ability. Each topic was delivered with equal excellence.

That said, a presentation on succession planning was well attended and seemed to be of particular interest to a lot of people.

Our Young Farmers & Ranchers Committee specifically requested a session on succession planning during the annual meeting. It's a topic that rightfully causes considerable anxiety among farmers and ranchers of all generations. We were fortunate to have Mike Garner from Raft River address this critical issue.

While many qualified experts and specialists work in this space, technical skills aren't the most important aspect of developing a

See **MILLER**, page 7

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COVER: See page 14 for a story on the Governor's Summit on Agricultural Viability, which was held to get the conversation started about how to balance growth with the desire to preserve farmland. Photo illustration by Kristy Lindauer

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Photos by Sean Ellis

About 14 farm groups celebrated Idaho Agriculture Day at the Capitol building Jan. 13.

Farm groups celebrate Idaho ag at the Capitol

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

BOISE – About 14 farm groups joined together inside the state's Capitol building Jan. 13 to celebrate Idaho agriculture and help educate legislators and the general public about Idaho's agricultural industry.

The annual Idaho Agriculture Day event, organized by the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, is a chance for farm and ranch groups to showcase the state's important agricultural sector.

Idaho has more than 22,000 farms and ranches that produce more than 180 agricultural commodities.

A University of Idaho report found that agriculture accounts for one in every nine jobs in Idaho, 17 percent of total sales and 13 percent of the state's gross domestic product.

The ag day display, set up on the second floor of the Capitol Rotunda, was open to the public. Many legislators and their aides visited the display, as well as the governor and lieutenant gover-

“From barley to hops to lamb to fruit, we offer a really large range of (commodities) in Idaho and we want to showcase that.”

– Liz Wilder, executive director, Idaho Wool Growers

nor, who are both ranchers and farmers.

The theme of this year's event was “A Taste of Idaho Agriculture” and the farm groups that participated each brought a test-sized sample that represented their commodity.

Visitors were able to sample potatoes, beef, cheese, lamb, barley and even a chocolate bean cake that used pinto beans instead of flour as an ingredient but tasted nothing like beans.

There were so many free samples available that a person could eat lunch at the event and some people did.

Idaho is the No. 1 producer of bean seed in the United States and normally ranks about No. 5 in total bean production. Idaho



Sydney Anderson, communications manager for the Idaho Barley Commission, talks to Ag Day participants about barley while offering free barley soup samples.

Bean Commission Executive Director Andi Woolf-Weibye said the event was a way to educate legislators about Idaho's significant bean industry as well as let people know that beans can be used in a wide variety of ways.

"You can use beans in a lot of different ways – as opposed to just your traditional chili and baked beans – in order to increase your protein in other recipes," she said.

Legislators and others visiting the Capitol building were greeted with a whole host of facts about Idaho agriculture, including that Idaho exports bean seed to more than 45 countries, or that Idaho is the nation's No. 1 barley state and produced 39 percent of country's total supply of barley last year.

"I think the purpose of today is to really highlight and showcase agriculture in Idaho for our legislators and legislative aides," said Liz Wilder, executive director of the Idaho Wool Growers Association. "This is a great event that really allows us to showcase the ag products that we offer in Idaho, as well as interact and interface with these policy makers and really drive home the important role that agriculture plays in Idaho's economy."

The event was also an opportunity to show the public just how big and diverse the state's agricultural industry is, she added.

"Everyone thinks meat and potatoes, and dairy, when they come to Idaho, but there is so much more depth to our agricultural industry here in Idaho," Wilder said. "From barley to hops to lamb to fruit, we offer a really large range of (commodities) in Idaho and we want to showcase that."

Idahoans have traditionally been pretty good about recognizing what the agriculture industry brings to the state, said Sydney Anderson, communications manager for the Idaho Barley Commission.

"But Idaho is growing," she added. "So it's our job within agriculture to tell our story and make sure legislators and other people know how important the agricultural industry, and barley, are to the state."

It's pretty much agreed in agriculture that most people outside the industry don't understand what it takes to put food on their table and keep it on grocery store shelves, said Rep. Shawn Dugert, R-Melba, a recently retired high school agriculture education teacher and FFA advisor.

Even a lot of legislators don't truly understand just how big and important the state's agricultural sector is, he added, and the ag day celebration is a chance to educate lawmakers and others about Idaho agriculture.

"Any time we can give people an appreciation of what it takes to put food on their tables is always a win," he said.

Britany Hurst Merchant, executive director of the Idaho Wheat Commission, said her message to legislators differed somewhat from the message she wanted to give to members of the general public that attended the event.

"To legislators, I want to impress on them the importance of the commission: what the commission does, that it's grower-governed, grower-led and grower-funded," she said.

For the public, she added, it was a chance to inform them that wheat is a major crop in Idaho – the state is one of the nation's main wheat-growing states – and that it is an important part of the diet: "It provides a lot of vitamins and minerals and nutrients that we need." ■

Notice of the Annual Meeting of IFB Mutual Insurance Holding Company

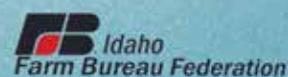
The 2026 annual meeting for members of the IFB Mutual Insurance Holding Company will be held on Friday, February 6, 2026, at 10AM at the company's home office. 275 Tierra Vista Drive in Pocatello, ID. You are invited to attend.

Jared Steadman- Secretary

Notice of Stockholders Meetings

The FB Development Corporation of Idaho annual stockholder meeting will take place right after the insurance company's meeting, Friday, February 6, 2026, at the company's home office, 275 Tierra Vista Drive in Pocatello, ID. The board of directors will be elected at this meeting.

Zak Miller - Executive Vice President, CEO



Continued from page 2

an opportunity to reflect on agriculture's role in building our country. Agriculture remains just as essential to America's strength today as it was at our founding.

Yet farmers continue to face mounting challenges that make long-term planning difficult. That's why Farm Bureau is launching FARM 250, an effort grounded in four pillars that reflect both our history and our future: Feeding families, Advancing innovation, Rural resilience, and Mindful stewardship. The policy adopted in Anaheim aligns with those pillars and reflects a commitment to long-term stability, not short-term fixes.

Farm Bureau's 2026 policy, set by farmers

Right now, the farm economy is under real pressure. Low margins, high input costs, and lingering losses from weather and market disruptions have pushed many farm families to the edge.

In Anaheim, farmers made it clear that short-term relief is still needed, especially for those whose losses haven't been fully addressed. That's why a top priority is working with Congress and the administration to deliver additional bridge support for farmers who are still struggling.

But we also know that stability doesn't come from temporary fixes alone. We need a new, multi-year farm bill to address outdated loan limits, invest in research and advance conservation and rural development programs, among many other critical priorities.

Labor remains one of the most pressing challenges facing agriculture. It's what I hear most often when I meet with farmers across the country. No matter the region or the crop, farmers are feeling the strain of an outdated system that doesn't reflect the realities of modern agriculture. Our 2026 policy calls for meaningful reforms that modernize agriculture labor programs.

Trade is just as essential to farm viability. Expanding market access and enforcing existing trade commitments are critical for long-term growth.

Farmers depend on strong export markets, and Farm Bureau will continue urging the administration to finalize market-opening trade agreements, challenge unfair trade barriers and ensure American agriculture remains competitive on the global stage.

Farmers are also clear about what they need from Washington when it comes to regulation: clarity, consistency and policies grounded in science. Farmers care deeply about the land, water and resources they steward every day. Regulations should support both environmental stewardship and economic sustainability.

That same clarity matters when discussions turn to food and health policy. Farmers want a seat at the table to share how our food is grown, safely and sustainably. Our policy supports transparency, science-based standards and a food system that values both farmer livelihoods and consumer well-being.

Strong farms also depend on strong rural infrastructure. That includes expanded

broadband access and continued investment in agricultural research through land-grant universities. Farmers also emphasized the importance of strengthening the supply chain—from processing capacity to market transparency—while promoting greater use of U.S.-grown biofuels, including year-round E15.

Conservation remains a core value for farmers, and it works best when it's voluntary, incentive-based and farmer-led. Farmers are already leaders in conservation, and our policy reinforces that environmental sustainability must go hand-in-hand with economic viability.

Farm Bureau will continue advocating for conservation programs that are grounded in sound science, flexible enough to work across diverse operations and supportive of farmers who are committed to caring for their land.

Grassroots voices driving Farm Bureau's 2026 advocacy

At the end of the day, our policy reflects the voices of farmers and ranchers who understand what's at stake. It is shaped by grassroots delegates who step up, speak out and help chart the course for the year ahead.

That grassroots foundation will guide our advocacy in 2026 as we work to ensure America's farmers can continue producing the food, fiber and renewable fuel our country depends on. I'm proud to stand with farmers and ranchers who are shaping the policies that will define the future of agriculture. ■

Continued from page 2

together and spend the better part of a day talking about possible ways to help save farmland.

It was stressed from the get-go that Farm Bureau, the governor and other groups that presented during the summit did not necessarily support or oppose any of the ideas discussed during the event. But it was nice to get the conversation started among so many diverse interests.

How to preserve farmland is no easy task – again, Farm Bureau has been discussing the issue for several decades – but it's an increasingly important undertaking.

Just from 2017 to 2022, Idaho lost 144,000 acres of land in farming and 2,119 farms and ranches. We still have 11.5 million acres of land in farming in the state and 22,000-plus farms and ranches, but the loss of that much farmland and farm operations in a five-year span is very concerning.

To be clear, the loss of farmland is not just an Idaho issue. It's a

national one. But it's happening at an increasing rate in Idaho. We are no longer in the middle of nowhere. Idaho has been discovered and its population growth is explosive in some areas of the state.

As an example of what agriculture in Idaho may soon be facing, a Boise State University study estimated that 64 percent of farmland in the Treasure Valley will be lost by 2100. That study is several years old and farmland loss in the Treasure Valley has only accelerated since then.

That's just using southwestern Idaho as an example. Development pressure and farmland loss is also increasing in many hotspots around the state, including in the Magic Valley, and in certain population centers in North and East Idaho.

With rapid population growth comes increased development and much of it is happening on what used to be productive farmland. Once farmland gets developed, it's gone forever. That ground will never again be used to produce food.

That's sad.

How to slow the loss of farmland is an incredibly complex issue and there are no easy answers. There is so much to consider.

For example, who is to say a farmer or rancher can't sell their land? Idaho Farm Bureau has always defended a farmer's right to sell their property if they choose to.

At the same time, everyone wants to preserve farmland. How do you do that without violating a landowner's right to sell their property if they decide that is what's best for their family?

Can local zoning rules be part of the answer? Maybe.

A lot of time was spent during the summit addressing Idaho's Local Land Use Planning Act, which spells out what counties and municipalities have to take into consideration when planning and approving development.

How local land use planning and other such considerations figure into the farmland preservation issue need to be discussed and figured out.

There appear to be some good minds ready to hash these issues out.

Farm Bureau's focus will remain on agricultural producers themselves and protecting their private property rights. If we protect the producers, we will end up protecting ag land.

Everyone will have their lane during these discussions. At Farm Bureau, our lane is looking out for the producer and their property rights.

As the newly elected president of Idaho Farm Bureau Federation, one of my main goals is to make sure agricultural producers themselves are front and center in any farmland preservation discussions or plans.

That means the men and women who actually toil away each year to produce the food that feeds the state and nation. In most cases, farms and ranches in Idaho have been operated by the same families for generations. ■

MILLER

Continued from page 2

succession plan. As a real dirt-on-your-hands farmer, Mike offered something more valuable than technical details; he shared real-life lessons from lived experience.

I'm grateful to Mike and everyone who contributes their wisdom, experience, and expertise to helping family farms successfully transition from one generation to the next. Everyone recognizes the need for succession planning, yet it remains one of the hardest things to accomplish, especially within a family.

I'm personally thankful my family has worked to establish our succession plan. My siblings and I are fifth-generation Idaho farmers, and I dearly hope there will be a sixth generation.

As a Farm Bureau employee, I represent a different succession planning perspective. I don't farm or ranch full time. That responsibility falls to my brother. However,

I've invested too much sweat, tears, bruises, and even blood into the farm and ranch I love to simply let it fade away.

I vividly remember the fear I felt the day I told my dad that while I felt entitled to nothing, I wanted a chance to own a small piece of our operation. I didn't want to be all hat and no cattle, even if my portion meant owning just a few bovines.

I'm blessed with a wise and kind father. He settled my fears with one simple word: "okay."

That moment was the most important step in our family's succession journey. Because Dad said yes, we could meet with lawyers, accountants, and insurance agents. They asked the necessary questions, drafted the papers, and helped us achieve a plan that treated everyone fairly, while recognizing that fairness doesn't always mean equal.

I realize not all families reach the same positive outcome. If you've experienced a

different result, I feel genuine sorrow for your circumstance.

Succession is inevitable; death comes to all. If you haven't asked the hard question yet, please find the courage to do so. And for those who may be asked, I encourage you to respond with kindness and love. The person asking likely doesn't want to diminish or replace you.

In fact, the opposite is probably true. Someone who asks about succession wants to be like you and continue what you've built.

What a glorious legacy can be created when some find the courage to ask the question and others respond positively, working together to ensure family farms have successful succession plans.

These conversations aren't easy, but they're necessary. Both the asking and answering are acts of love and they honor the past while securing the future.

The hard question deserves to be asked. And it deserves a compassionate answer. ■



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Farming again leads national Gallup poll

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Americans still view farming more favorably than any other industry sector, according to an annual Gallup poll.

The national poll, which began in 2001, asks people whether their overall view of 25 key industries and business sectors is very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative or very negative.

The 2025 poll was conducted Aug. 1-20 and released Sept. 25.

The “farming and agriculture” sector again led the poll, with 60 percent of Americans having a “very” or “somewhat” positive view of the industry.

The computer industry (59 percent) came in at second, followed by the restaurant industry (52 percent).

Those were the only three sectors viewed positively by a majority of Americans in the 2025 poll.

As crop producers continue to struggle with low farm-level prices, it's good to know that Americans appreciate their efforts, said New Plymouth farmer Galen Lee.

“I'm happy to know that,” he said. “It doesn't change the low prices that we are receiving right now, but it's good to know that all the work we are doing to feed the nation is appreciated and that the American public trusts us.”

Farming nabbed the No. 1 spot in the poll for the first time in 2020 and has kept it since.

Some farmers speculate that many Americans gained a new appreciation of the agriculture industry during the initial COVID-19 scare, when some grocery store shelves were temporarily bare due to panic buying and supply chain disruptions.

When that food scare dissipated and Americans realized that farmers and ranchers were plowing ahead with their usual plans to produce an abundant food supply, many relieved people may have been left with a more positive feeling about agriculture as a result.

Wilder farmer Miguel Villafana said



Photo by Pamela Payne

According to a national Gallup poll, Americans view farming more favorably than they do any other business or industry sector.

Americans' favorable view of farming can probably be attributed to several factors.

For one, he said, 95 percent of farms in the country are family farms.

“I think people appreciate that when they think of farming, they see the family with the kids,” Villafana said. “They don't think of a big building in downtown San Francisco, so a benefit that we have is that our image is strong.”

Farming is also pretty transparent, he added.

“When you drive by a farm, you see the fields, you see the cows, the crops, the facilities and it's all out in the open,” Villafana said.

If a person was curious enough, they could watch daily how a field of sugar beets or a field of corn or potatoes is raised.

“It's all out in the open with nothing to hide,” he said. “... they see a crop go from planted to harvested and they're able to see the whole process. Then when they go to the store, they can visualize how the produce was grown because they've seen it.”

Most Americans also see farmers as good people, which they are, Villafana added.

“I think whether people live in the city or country, they see a farmer as a good person,” he said. “Farmers have earned a reputation of serving and volunteering in the community. During the winter they'll take their tractor and plow snow off of driveways for neighbors, they're volunteer firemen, and they often donate some of the crops to the community....”

In 2020, the grocery industry ranked No. 2 in the Gallup poll, behind farming, with a 63 percent positive rating, while the restaurant industry came in at No. 3 with a 61 percent rating.

Both those sectors have seen their favorability ratings fall since then. The restaurant industry had a positive rating of 52 percent in 2025 and the grocery industry came in at 40 percent.

This might show that Americans are partly blaming those two industries, but nor farmers, for higher food prices.

While food prices have continued to increase, the price that farmers receive for their commodity is actually decreasing.

Apparently, most Americans realize that.

At the bottom of the 2025 poll was the federal government, as just 23 percent of Americans had a positive view of the sector. The pharmaceutical industry came in next to last at 28 percent.

In the 2025 Gallup poll, 29 percent of Americans had a very positive view of the farming and agriculture sector and 31 percent had a somewhat positive view.

Twenty-two percent were neutral, 11 percent had a somewhat negative view of the industry and 5 percent a very negative view of it.

Interestingly, Republican survey respondents had a much more positive view of the farming industry than Democrat respondents.

According to a Gallup news release about the poll, political “partisans’ average industry ratings are typically more positive when the sitting president is from their own party....”

According to Gallup, “The farming and agriculture and the oil and gas industries have usually been viewed more positively by Republicans and Republican leaners than by Democrats and Democratic leaners.”

While 74 percent of Republicans or Republican leaners had a very or somewhat positive view of farming and agriculture, only 51 percent of Democrats or Democrat leaners did. ■

Building a heart-healthy plate: Where barley fits in the new Food Pyramid

By Sydney Anderson
Idaho Barley Commission

As Americans look to food for both nourishment and prevention of chronic disease, barley checks all the boxes as a versatile, fiber-rich and nutrient-dense whole grain that deserves a place on our plates.

Barley isn't just for livestock or beer — it's a wholesome food grain with a long, credible history and a bright future in American's healthy eating patterns.

Barley is rich in fiber, vitamins, minerals and plant proteins. It contains eight of the 10 essential amino acids and offers a mild, nutty flavor that easily complements any recipe.

Barley might be an ancient grain, but it's a modern and timeless superfood. Its texture and taste make it a satisfying substitute for rice or other grains, and its nutrient profile supports general wellness.

Last year, 39% of the U.S. barley crop was grown in Idaho.

This American Heart Month — February — it's important to remember that barley can play a key role in heart health.

According to the American Heart Association, diets rich in whole grains and soluble fiber are linked to lower cholesterol, reduced risk of heart disease, and better overall cardiovascular health.

One of barley's biggest nutritional assets is betaglucan, a type of soluble

The New Pyramid



fiber strongly linked to lowering insulin resistance and lower "bad" LDL cholesterol, which is a major risk factor for heart disease.

Barley also has a low glycemic index (GI), meaning it causes a slower, steadier rise in blood sugar compared to higher-GI grains like white rice or refined wheat. This makes it a smart choice for heart health, diabetes management, and sustained energy.

The fiber in barley — a nutrient often under-consumed — also aids digestion, supports stable blood sugar levels, and promotes satiety so you feel full longer.

In the new 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which mark a significant reset of U.S. nutrition policy, the emphasis has shifted toward eating real, whole foods and minimizing highly processed items.

While this updated guidance elevates protein, full-fat dairy, and healthy fats, it also highlights the value of whole foods and nutrient dense choices like whole grains. Grains such as barley fit within this real food framework when chosen in their whole or minimally processed forms.

Barley's adaptability in the kitchen — from hearty breakfast granola to vibrant grain salads and comforting stews — makes



it easy for any family to incorporate this grain into everyday meals.

Recipes, inspiration and nutritional information on EatBarley.org showcase how barley can be enjoyed at breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks alike.

As dietary advice evolves, one message remains constant: choose foods that nourish the body and bring whole, natural ingredients back to the center of our plates. Barley fits this goal beautifully.

Whether you're aiming to boost your fiber intake, support heart health, or simply diversify your meals with a delicious and hearty grain, barley delivers real nutrition that aligns with both traditional wisdom and modern dietary guidance. ■

Southwest Barley Chili



Servings: 8 (1 cup)

Prep time: 15 min.

Cook time: 50-55 min.

Total time: 1 hr, 10 min.

Calories (per serving): 438 kcal; Total Fat: 8.3 g; Saturated Fat: 3.9 g; Cholesterol: 59 mg; Sodium: 554 mg; Carbohydrates: 57 g; Dietary Fiber: 13.8 g; Protein: 36 g

Ingredients

- 1 cup hulless barley
- 3 cups low sodium chicken broth
- 1 medium can diced tomatoes, undrained
- 2 small cans tomato sauce
- 3 cups water
- 1 Tbsp chili powder
- 2 tsp cumin
- 1 tsp oregano
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp cayenne or red pepper flakes (optional)
- 1 pound chicken, cubed (may use raw or cooked)
- 1 can black beans
- 1 cup corn kernels (canned or frozen)
- 1 cup shredded cheese

Directions

1. In large stock pot, combine chicken broth, water, tomatoes, tomato sauce, chili powder, cumin, oregano and cayenne. Bring to a boil and add barley.
2. If using raw chicken, add chicken then stir to combine. Cover, reduce heat and simmer 45-50 minutes, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking and adding more water if needed.
3. When barley is tender, stir in black beans, corn and if using cooked chicken, add it now.
4. Add additional water or broth if mixture is too thick. Continue to simmer until heated through for about 5 minutes.
5. Serve with shredded cheese.

Ingredients

Crust & Crumble Topping

- 1/2 cup unsalted butter, melted 1 stick
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 3/4 cup barley flakes
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/4 cup light brown sugar, packed

Berry Layer

- 2 cups berries frozen or fresh
- 1/3 cup granulated sugar
- 2 tbsp lemon juice
- 2 tsp cornstarch

Servings: 12 bars

Prep time: 15 min.

Cook time: 45-55 min.

Total time: 1 hr, 10 min.

Calories (per serving): 243 kcal; Total Fat: 7.9g; Saturated Fat: 5 g; Cholesterol: 20 mg; Sodium: 77 mg; Carbohydrates: 42.8 g; Dietary Fiber: 2.1 g; Protein: 1.9 g

Berry Barley Flake Crumble Bars

These Berry Barley Flake Crumble Bars feature a buttery crust made with wholesome barley flakes, topped with a juicy berry filling and a golden crumble. They're the perfect combination of sweet, tart, and hearty — ideal for breakfast on the go, an afternoon snack, or a light dessert.



Directions

1. Preheat oven to 350F. Line an 8x8 inch pan with aluminum foil and spray.
2. Mix together melted butter, flour, oats, and sugars until well combined. Mixture will be dry with some larger, well-formed crumble pieces.
3. Set 1 heaping cup of mixture aside to be used as crumble topping later.
4. Pour remaining mixture into prepared pan and pack to create a smooth, flat crust. Set aside.

Crust & Crumble Topping

Berry Layer

5. In a large bowl add all ingredients and toss to combine.
6. Evenly distribute berry mixture over crust in pan.
7. Evenly sprinkle with the heaping cup crumble mixture.

Baking the Bars

8. Bake for approximately 45-55 minute or until edges and center are set. If using frozen berries, baking time will be closer to 55 minutes. Monitor carefully to determine doneness.
9. Set on a wire rack and allow to cool for at least 30 minutes before cutting or they will fall apart.

An ode to an old ag teacher

By Mitchell Searle

For Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

My high school experience and subsequent adult life have been blessed by the mentorship of my ag teacher, Mr. Lex Godfrey.

I recently had my 15-year class reunion, and it has caused me to reflect on my high school experiences.

Some memories were funny, like asking a girl to a dance by putting an old blue toilet in the back of her pickup.

Some memories were embarrassing, like giving a speech in front of the whole school and thinking I could just "wing it." Crash and burn would be an understatement.

My mind turned to who I am today because of these experiences and because of the people who believed in me. I spent a lot of time in ag classes and the FFA program. One ag teacher, in particular, stood out.

There were three ag teachers at Burley High School as I came through the ranks: Sam Condie, Jessica Stapleman, and Lex Godfrey. Each teacher was unique and connected to different students. Some preferred Mr. Condie, some Mrs. Stapleman, and some Mr. Godfrey.

For whatever reason, I really connected with Mr. Godfrey.

I worked closely with him in FFA (chapter officer team, parliamentary procedure, extemporaneous speaking, and soils judging) and in classes (welding, small engine repair, fabrication).

As a result of all these interactions, I now realize that he was trying to help me have confidence in myself.

Whether it was my leadership skills, my public speaking ability (or lack thereof), or in my welding beads, Lex invested in me as a person, not just a student.

Through three years of his welding and fabrication classes, I discovered a passion for working with metal. I loved using my brain and brawn to turn sticks of dimensional metal into something useful. I found

'Developing confidence comes from finding what you love and pursuing it.'

confidence in my abilities because he helped me develop real-world fabrication skills.

My senior welding project was building a 48' flatbed semi-trailer that we still use on the farm today.

Was the trailer perfect? No.

Have I had to rebuild and reinforce certain areas? Yes.

Did I bite off more than I could chew? Yes. Heck, I didn't even finish the trailer until after graduation.

Lex helped me after school and on weekends, and I doubt he was paid for all the extra time he spent helping me.

During tumultuous teenage years, when parental influence was rejected, Lex Godfrey kept me on the straight and narrow path. He helped me funnel my energy into learning how to weld and fabricate.

I learned to produce something valuable for society, and in doing so, I also realized that I am valuable and capable.

Not much of what Lex did for me can be shown on a report card. Building confidence in an insecure teenager isn't a statistic that can be measured very easily.

He never got a pay raise because of the good advice he gave to me, but his advice was priceless to me. Knowing that he believed in me, and that I could believe in myself, changed my life.

I now realize that Lex wasn't just worried about building trailers, he was worried about building my character. Lex worried less about my grades and more about my life choices.

Lex wasn't giving out a fish, he was teaching me to fish for myself.

Thank you Lex Godfrey. It took me 15 years to realize your impact on my life. The seeds of confidence you planted in me have slowly ripened into immense gratitude.

Whether you have been out of school for

15 years or 50, I encourage you readers to reflect on your mentors and reach out to thank them.

If you had no mentors, I challenge you to become a mentor to the youth. Most FFA chapters have Advisory Boards and Alumni Associations. These organizations utilize community members to help guide the program and mentor the youth.

Reach out to your local FFA chapter and ask how you can help. Your volunteer efforts can free up a teacher's time. They can spend less time focusing on administrative tasks and more time focusing on students

In a society plagued by depression and suicide, I invite you to discover the passions that fill you with purpose and joy. Teenagers who read this need to know they are not alone. Don't tell yourself you are worthless, because you are actually priceless.

Developing confidence comes from finding what you love and pursuing it.

I found self-confidence through welding, but for others it could be sports, theater, band, art, or math. Some find their passion earlier, like high school. Some find their passion later, like a midlife crisis. It is never too late to start.

To the ag teachers across this state, I say, keep the big picture in mind. Not every student will respond to your style of teaching, but some will. That could make all the difference in their lives. I know it did for me. ■



Submitted photo

Mitchell Searle

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Country Chuckles

By Jonny Hawkins



Summit tackles farmland loss issue

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

BOISE – Idaho's rapid population growth is impacting farmland and not in a good way.

The development that has come along with that growth has increasingly resulted in the loss of more farmland.

From 2017 to 2022, 144,000 acres of agricultural land in Idaho disappeared, according to USDA's 2022 Census of Agriculture.

During that same time, the state lost 2,119 farms and ranches.

Though many of those were small operations that account for a small percentage of the state's overall agricultural production, those numbers demonstrate the increasing pressure that development is placing on farmland in Idaho.

The situation has gotten so serious that Gov. Brad Little, himself a rancher and farmer, held a summit to sound an alarm on the issue and lay the groundwork to try to find ways to preserve farmland in Idaho.

About 240 people attended the Governor's Summit on Agricultural Viability in Idaho Dec. 18. Another 85 watched it online.

The all-day event was held in the Capitol building and included farm and ranch landowners and leaders of Idaho farm groups and agribusinesses.

It included members of academia and conservation groups that are interested in preserving farmland, as well as government agencies that have a stake in agriculture.

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation, American Farmland Trust and the Idaho State Department of Agriculture organized the summit, which was attended by about 10 legislators.

"This topic has garnered a lot of attention over the past several years," Braden Jensen, IFBF's director of governmental affairs, told participants.

Jensen and others stressed how important the agriculture industry is to Idaho and why it's so important to protect it.

There are still 22,000-plus farms and ranches and more than 11 million acres of farmland in Idaho, according to the 2022 ag census.

A recent University of Idaho study found that one in nine jobs in Idaho are directly or indirectly attributed to agriculture, as well as 17 percent of total sales and 13 percent of the state's total gross state product.

"Agriculture is the backbone of our state and it's facing a lot of pressure," Jensen said.

"Ag and food processing in the state of Idaho contribute \$26 billion to our economy," ISDA Director Chanel Tewalt told participants. "There is no stronger or more important industry in the state of Idaho."

"As massive and productive and incredible as agriculture is here in Idaho, it is facing massive headwinds," she added.

The governor, Jensen and other presenters made it clear the ideas discussed during the summit would not necessarily represent their organization's position on farmland preservation.

Jensen said later that the main reason for the summit was to raise awareness of the issue outside of just agriculture and to get conversations started.

"We hope this summit helps spur further discussions," he said. "What was accomplished during the summit was increasing the awareness of this issue and getting the conversations started, outside of just Farm Bureau and ag circles."

One thing that summit speakers did agree on was that the issue of farmland preservation is a complicated one and there are no easy solutions.

"This is something I've spent an inordinate amount of time on and there is no one (simple) solution," said Little.

Tewalt said farmland preservation is an incredibly difficult topic to discuss and "there are no perfect, easy answers to this."

A plethora of possible ways to help stem the loss of farmland were discussed during the summit. One of those was the need to incentivize farmers to not sell their land for development.

"Who can blame someone for wanting to maximize the profits they can make from their land," said Jennifer Reibe, a crop consultant and member of the Payette County Board of Commissioners.

She said the topic of farmland preservation should put a big focus on "what we can do to incentivize landowners to stay on their land and continue farming."

The need to find an Idaho solution without too much government involvement was another point.

"It's really, really important that we don't get government overly involved," said IFBF President Matt Dorsey.

Dorsey, who farms in Canyon County, said the main focus of the discussion should be not solely on farm ground but also on the agricultural producers themselves who have built the industry into what it is today in Idaho.

"We need to make sure we don't overlook producers," he said. "We need to be focused on protecting our producers."

The use of zoning as a tool to help preserve farm ground was another main topic of discussion.

Idaho's Local Land Use Planning Act (LLUPA) "is the largest tool in the toolbox we have for protecting agriculture," said Keri Smith, executive director of Growing Together, which focuses on preserving ag land in Canyon County.

George Crookham, CEO of Crookham Company, a family-owned seed business located in Caldwell, said LLUPA, which was passed into law five decades ago, spells out what counties and municipalities have to take into consideration when planning and approving development.

One of those things, he said, is how development will impact a neighborhood and the broader community.

He believes LLUPA is an overlooked tool that can and should be used to direct orderly development and help preserve farmland.

"It's already in state statute," Crookham said about LLUPA. "It's been there for 50 years."

Preserving the private property rights of farmers and ranchers was another topic of discussion.

"We have to respect property rights and make sure we're not infringing on them," Jensen said.

The trick, he added, is respecting property rights while also preserving farmland.

Something needs to be done, summit presenters said, because the rapid growth and development Idaho has experienced in recent years isn't stopping.

Jaap Vos, a University of Idaho researcher, presented data that shows one in four people in Idaho now were not here before 2010.

"We are no longer the middle of nowhere," Vos said. "If we don't start protecting the things we care about – the things that make Idaho what it is – they will be gone before we know it."

Jodi Brandt, a Boise State University researcher, presented results from a BSU study that estimates 64 percent of farmland

in the Treasure Valley will be lost by 2100.

Growth and development pressure in Idaho have accelerated since that study was conducted and it is happening beyond the Treasure Valley, she said.

"Good land doesn't replace itself" said David Anderson, the Idaho senior program manager for American Farmland Trust. "Once converted, it's gone."

He said fragmentation of farmland – for example, a subdivision plopped in the middle of ag land – is a serious concern in Idaho right now.

Once farmland is fragmented, it is much more likely to be developed, he said.

He pointed to separate studies by researchers from University of Idaho and BYU-Idaho that both show Idaho counties receive more tax benefits from farmland than they do from residential properties.

In essence, he said, the studies show that farmland is subsidizing residential development.

"Unfettered fragmentation of our working lands is cancer to our agricultural economies," Anderson said. "If we do not get this (under control) ... then our economies are really going to start to suffer from the loss of our land base."

Summit participants were urged to be involved in the discussions about farmland preservation and were reminded that if they're not at the table, they could be on the menu.

"I sit at the table so I'm not on the menu," said Mary Huff, Owyhee County's planning director. "Being involved cannot be overstated for the producers in this room."

Weiser farmer Tristan Winegar said the summit was a good start and he believes it should happen again, on an even bigger scale.

"We need to touch more people, but it was definitely a good start; it was a success," said Winegar, president of Washington County Farm Bureau. "The fact that the governor was there and it was held in the Capitol building was a big deal."

Crookham said he's been dealing with the topic of farmland preservation for two decades. He said he enjoyed hearing from people during breaks and lunch that they were unaware of some of the issues and solutions.

"It's good that people understand how important ag land is to our economy and how residential development doesn't pay for itself," he said.

"It's great to share but now we need a path forward," he added.

Winegar, 37, said the rapid loss of farmland has been going on his entire life.

"People need to wake up and realize we are digging ourselves into a hole," he said. "This is serious and we have to do something ... different. Things can't go on like this." ■





Idaho Farm Bureau Federation photo

Alfalfa in the red: rising costs, falling returns

By Daniel Munch
American Farm Bureau Federation
Economist

Alfalfa is a core input into U.S. dairy and beef production and one of the country's most economically significant crops. In 2024, it ranked as the fourth most valuable field crop, generating an estimated \$8.1 billion in farm-gate sales, behind only corn, soybeans and wheat.

In recent years, alfalfa producers have faced a sustained deterioration in margins, driven by a combination of weather-related production volatility, persistently high input costs, shifting international livestock feed demand and heightened export uncertainty.

Unlike many other major crops, alfalfa has limited options to offset

losses when prices fall, as available risk management tools are narrowly focused and do not address broader margin pressures.

Those pressures are now reflected clearly in returns. Prices spiked during the drought-driven supply tightening of 2021–2022, but that rally reversed as weather conditions improved and export demand weakened.

With prices now below full economic cost in many regions, losses have widened, and alfalfa is not eligible to receive payments from the recently announced \$11 billion Farmer Bridge Assistance Program, leaving the sector's current shortfall unaddressed.

Production dynamics shape risk

Unlike annual crops that are terminated every year, alfalfa is a perennial legume grown in multi-year “stands,” where a single planting supports repeated harvests over multiple seasons.

Fields are typically harvested repeatedly for five to seven years or longer, depending on management, weather and water availability. In rain-fed regions such as the Midwest and upper Plains, growers commonly take three to four cuttings per year, while irrigated systems in portions of the West and Southwest can support seven or more cuttings annually.

This long stand life limits how quickly production can respond to market signals. When prices rise, new seedings represent only a small share of total acreage, and newly planted stands often take one to two years to reach full productivity. Conversely, when prices fall, growers may remain locked into production even as margins deteriorate. The result is a supply base that adjusts far more slowly than most annual crops.

Geographically, alfalfa production is widespread but concentrated in regions with strong dairy and cattle sectors and more favorable growing conditions. California, Idaho, Montana, the Dakotas and Arizona consistently rank among the top producing states, achieving high yields due to longer growing seasons and irrigation.

Nationally, alfalfa acreage has declined for decades. From 2000 to 2025, harvested acres fell by nearly 40%, dropping from roughly 23 million acres to about 14 million.

Part of this decline reflects land competition from crops with

more favorable economic returns, especially crops eligible for commodity safety net programs such as Price Loss Coverage (PLC), Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC) and marketing loans, as well as those benefiting from biofuel-driven demand that has periodically lifted prices over the past two decades.

Drought and weather volatility

Weather has been one of the most persistent headwinds alfalfa growers face. From 2020 through 2022, the U.S. experienced one of the most geographically widespread drought periods on record. According to the drought monitor, by early 2023, growers had endured 119 consecutive weeks with at least 40% of the contiguous U.S. in drought, and in October 2022, over 60% of the country was classified as abnormally dry or worse.

For alfalfa, drought reduces both yield and quality, while water shortages in irrigated regions can force acreage out of production entirely.

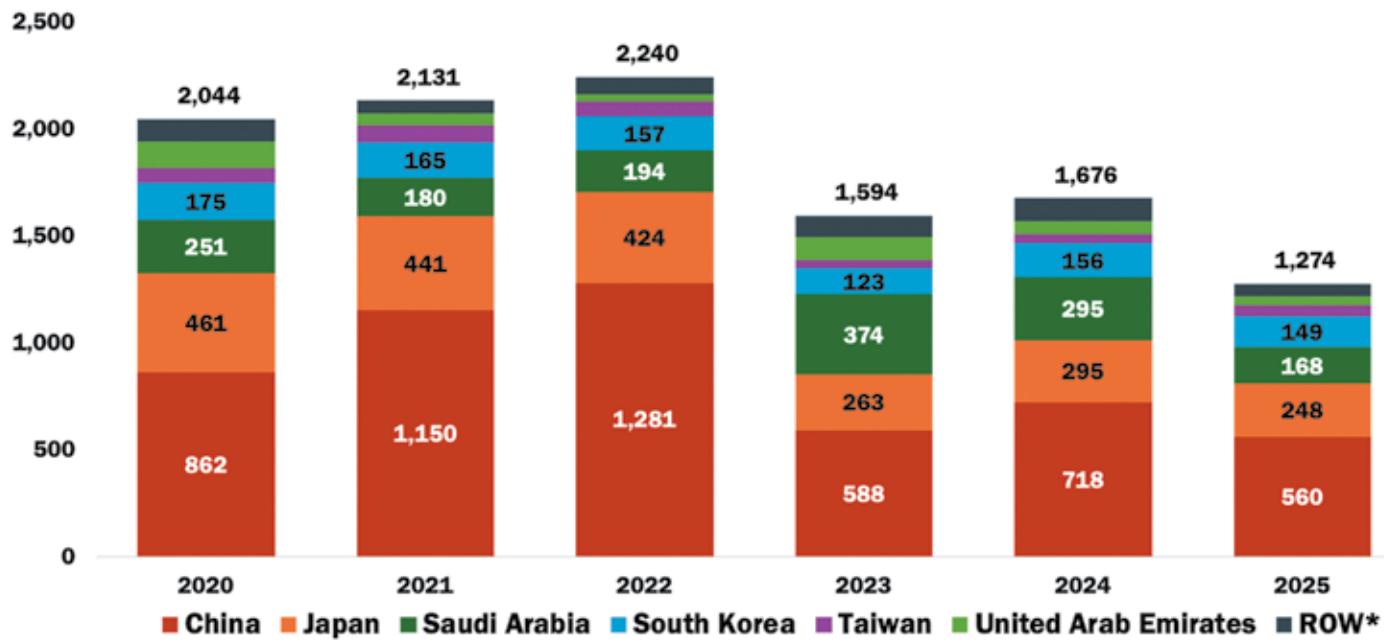
In California and Arizona, curtailed surface-water deliveries and tightening groundwater regulations led some growers to fallow alfalfa acres during 2021–2022, contributing to the lowest U.S. hay inventories recorded since 1954, tightening supplies and placing upward pressure on hay prices.

Drought also intensified demand in the hay market. According to our surveys of drought-impacted farmers and ranchers in 2021 and 2022, 70% to 80% of respondents reported removing animals from rangeland due to insufficient forage, increasing reliance on hay.

Nearly 90% reported higher local feed and forage costs, and

U.S. ALFALFA EXPORTS DOWN 43% SINCE 2022 (JAN–SEP)

Thousand metric tons | 2020-2025 (January – September for all years)

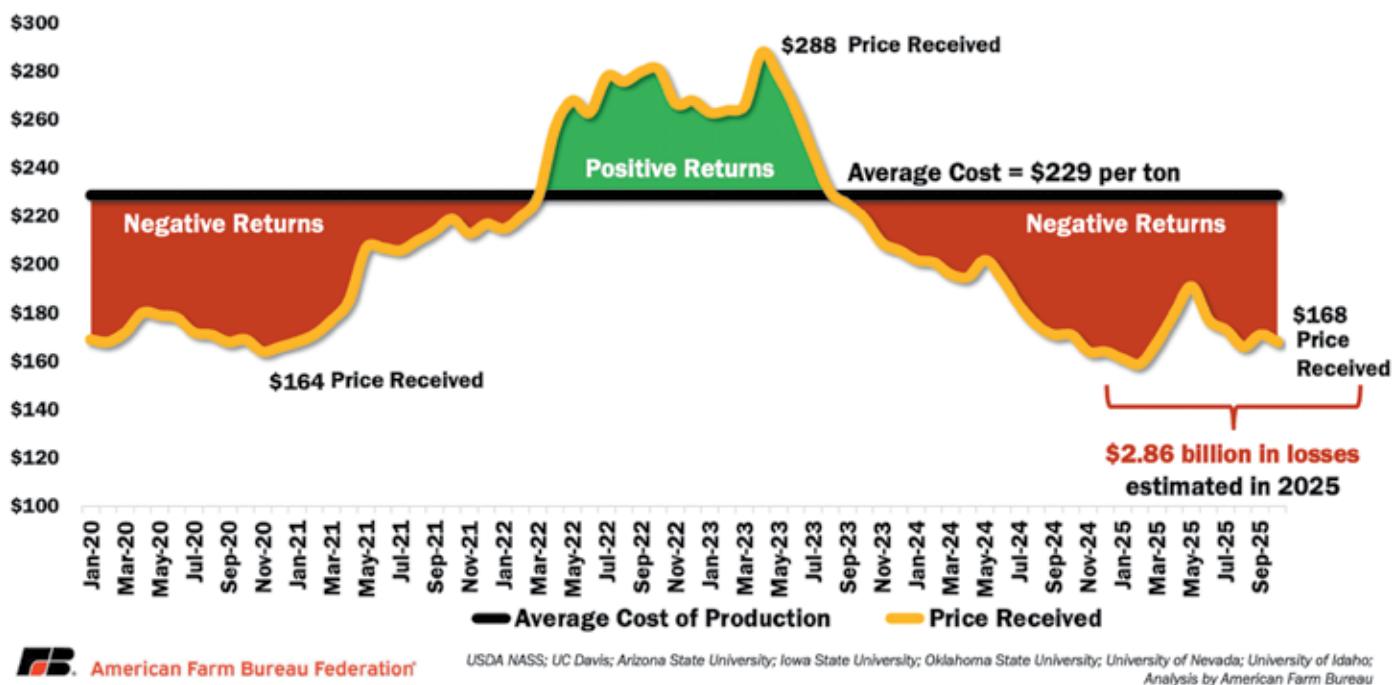


American Farm Bureau Federation

USDA FAS; Analysis by American Farm Bureau
*ROW= Rest of World

AVERAGE ALFALFA RETURNS IN THE RED SINCE AUGUST 2023

Price received - dollars per ton | Monthly | Average cost of production based on land-grant universities



more than 70% traveled long distances to secure feed. For many cattle operations, these conditions translated into emotional structural adjustments: 66% of respondents reported herd liquidations, decisions that continue to influence the U.S. cattle herd's ability to recover.

As a result, weather-driven supply shocks tend to produce sharper and more persistent price movements, with pronounced price spikes during drought years, followed by softening as weather improves and inventories gradually rebuild.

Trade volatility

Exports have become a critical, and increasingly volatile, outlet for U.S. alfalfa, particularly for Western producers. Roughly 31% of West Coast alfalfa and other hay production is exported, compared to about 3% of total U.S. hay output nationally, leaving Western growers especially exposed to shifts in global demand.

Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Taiwan have long served as key destinations for U.S. alfalfa, particularly for premium dairy-quality hay. Since 2012, however, China has consistently ranked as the largest foreign buyer by volume, driven by rapid expansion of its dairy herd and efforts to improve milk yields through higher-quality feed.

In 2022, China purchased approximately 1.66 million metric tons, accounting for 57% of total U.S. alfalfa hay exports and playing an outsized role in supporting Western hay prices.

That export channel has weakened sharply. After reaching a record 2.88 million metric tons in 2022, total U.S. alfalfa hay exports fell to about 2.18 million metric tons in 2023, a 23% year-over-

year decline and the lowest level in a decade.

The contraction was driven overwhelmingly by China, where imports of U.S. alfalfa fell 47%, dropping to 870,000 metric tons. Softer Chinese milk prices combined with an oversupplied domestic dairy sector and broader economic slowdown, reduced feed demand and curtailed purchases.

This pullback continued into 2024 and 2025. Between January and September, China imported 1.28 million metric tons of U.S. alfalfa in 2022, compared to 718,000 metric tons in 2024 and just 560,000 metric tons in 2025, the lowest level since 2020.

Ongoing U.S.-China trade tensions and inspection-related frictions have added further uncertainty to what was once the most reliable export market.

Other markets have provided only partial and uneven offsets. Saudi Arabia's imports surged in 2023, rising roughly 42% to about 431,000 metric tons, as domestic water-conservation policies sharply curtailed local forage production.

However, shipments to Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern buyers softened through 2024 and into 2025, as procurement strategies shifted and buyers adjusted inventories following the 2023 surge.

The UAE followed a similar pattern, with imports jumping more than 250% in 2023 from a low base but failing to sustain that pace in subsequent years. Japan's imports of U.S. alfalfa declined sharply in 2023 and remained subdued in 2024–2025, as a strong U.S. dollar reduced price competitiveness and buyers increasingly sourced from alternative suppliers or relied more heavily on domestic forage.

Together, these trends underscore that gains in select markets have not been sufficient or durable enough to offset the contraction in Chinese demand.

Prices fall as costs stay elevated

The financial impact of these combined pressures is now evident in returns. Alfalfa prices peaked during 2021–2022 amid drought-driven shortages, but the rally proved short-lived.

From April 2023 to November 2024, national average prices fell from about \$288 per ton to \$164 per ton, a 43% decline. By 2025, prices averaged roughly \$171 per ton, well below recent break-even levels.

At the same time, production costs have remained stubbornly high. University cost-of-production studies across the Plains and Western states show full economic costs ranging from \$165 to more than \$300 per ton, depending on irrigation intensity, yield and region. Input expenses, particularly water, fertilizer, labor, fuel and machinery, have climbed 20% to 35% since 2020, while yields have stagnated near 3.5 tons per acre.

Estimated 2025 Economic Losses

Cost-of-production studies from the University of California (2020), University of Arizona (2023), Iowa State University (2025), Oklahoma State University (2024), University of Nevada (2008-indexed) and the University of Idaho (2020) show that alfalfa production carries an average full economic cost of about \$229 per ton, a figure that reflects operating expenses, cash overhead, and the annualized non-cash costs of land, equipment and field establishment.

Together, the states represented by these university budgets account for about one-third of U.S. alfalfa production. While some higher-yield operations may cover a portion of variable operating costs, recent prices frequently fail to recover full economic costs, leaving producers unable to fully cover capital recovery and land charges.

Using USDA's estimate of 14.12 million harvested alfalfa acres in 2025 and an average yield of 3.51 tons per acre, total production reached roughly 49.8 million tons, placing the sector's annual economic production costs near \$11.4 billion.

USDA-National Agricultural Statistics Service price data show 2025 year-to-date average prices near \$171 per ton, generating approximately \$8.5 billion in farm-level revenue. The result is an estimated \$2.9 billion economic shortfall in 2025, or a loss of about \$203 per acre.

Limited safety nets and exclusion from recent aid

Despite its economic scale, alfalfa has never been a covered commodity under core farm bill commodity programs such as PLC and ARC. As a result, alfalfa producers do not have access to price- or revenue-based support when markets weaken, unlike many other major crops.

Some risk management tools are available through the federal crop insurance program, but coverage remains limited and uneven. In certain states, producers can insure alfalfa hay or seed under yield-based policies, though these products are not widely available and do not protect against price-driven revenue losses.

A key constraint is the absence of a standardized price discovery mechanism for alfalfa, which limits the feasibility of revenue-based insurance. The most commonly used tool for forage producers is the Pasture, Rangeland and Forage (PRF) rainfall index program, which provides indemnities when precipitation in a selected grid falls below historical averages.

PRF is primarily structured to help livestock producers manage forage availability risk rather than to insure market-oriented hay production, and it is not crop-specific or tied to actual yield, quality or market sales. As a result, many alfalfa growers, particularly those producing hay for commercial sale, may view PRF as an imperfect substitute for traditional yield or revenue insurance.

Disaster assistance during recent droughts has also been uneven. Programs such as the Livestock Forage Disaster Program (LFP) and the Emergency Livestock Relief Program (ELRP) provided payments to livestock producers experiencing grazing losses or elevated feed costs during 2021–2022.

For cattle operators who both own livestock and grow alfalfa, these payments may have supported forage use or purchases. However, standalone alfalfa growers without livestock generally did not qualify, highlighting a structural gap between livestock-focused disaster aid and forage producers whose losses stemmed from reduced yields, quality degradation or market disruptions.

Ad hoc assistance tied to trade and pandemic disruptions has provided only modest relief. During the U.S.–China trade dispute, alfalfa was initially excluded from the 2018 Market Facilitation Program (MFP) and later added in 2019 following industry advocacy.

While payment rates varied by county, alfalfa payments were typically under \$30 per acre, substantially lower than payments received by many row crop producers.

Pandemic-era assistance did increase support but only marginally. Under the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), alfalfa growers were eligible for multiple payments up to \$35 per acre each. At typical yields of 4–5 tons per acre, that support translated to roughly \$7–\$9 per ton, a limited offset against production costs that often exceeded \$200 per ton during the same period.

Looking ahead

Alfalfa's role in U.S. agriculture is foundational, supporting livestock production, rural economies and export markets across more than 218,000 farms nationwide, according to the 2022 Census of Agriculture. Yet in 2026, growers face a familiar but intensifying challenge: high costs, volatile weather, uncertain trade access and limited policy support.

Without more responsive risk management tools and timely assistance, prolonged negative margins risk accelerating acreage loss and undermining long-term supply resilience.

Recognizing alfalfa's economic importance, alongside other crops facing similar pressures, will be essential as policymakers consider how best to ensure the stability of the broader agricultural system. ■

UI program giving high schools robots to recruit students into ag-tech careers

By John O'Connell
University of Idaho

ABERDEEN – Plastic parts, rubber tubes and wires littered a table in a botany classroom at Aberdeen High School.

University of Idaho Extension educator Tom Jacobsen, Fremont County, told a group of students to start building, and they quickly began gathering and snapping together matching pieces.

Jacobsen and Heidi Codling, from the Idaho Falls-based College of Eastern Idaho (CEI), have been visiting high school classrooms throughout the region to introduce Ag XRP, a hands-on program promoting careers in agricultural technology.

Students are challenged to assemble robots from kits, using a finished model as a guide.

Each participating teacher receives a kit with components to build a fully automated irrigation robot. The robots include a probe that tests soil moisture and activates a water pump when the soil is too dry.

“Our goal is to help build confidence with the tools they are likely to encounter in agricultural careers,” Jacobsen said. “By engaging with technology early, students begin to understand that agriculture needs skilled problem-solvers who can operate, maintain and improve these systems.”

Beyond raising awareness about high-tech jobs in agriculture, classroom visits serve as recruitment opportunities.

Codling is leading efforts to launch an agricultural program at CEI by 2027, working closely with U of I’s Department of Agricultural Education, Leadership and Communications to align content for transfer students.

New ag curriculum

Jacobsen and Codling are also collaborating on writing new plant and soil sciences curriculum for use by Idaho high school agriculture teachers.

The previous curriculum, last updated in 1991, predates major advances in agricultural technology such as GPS-guided tractors and variable-rate input applications. The new curriculum will include instructions to 3D print parts needed to build projects associated with each lesson.

Codling authored the first module, which includes 150 pages about agricultural cybersecurity and is on a fast track to being



Photos by University of Idaho

University of Idaho Extension educator Tom Jacobsen, Fremont County, helps Aberdeen High School biology students troubleshoot as they seek to remedy assembly mistakes while they build their own irrigation robot.

edited. Jacobsen is pilot testing a 200-page soil science module and developing additional modules on precision agriculture and plant growth.

Versatile teaching tools

Before students began assembling their robot during Jacobsen’s early December visit to Aberdeen, Codling spoke about cybersecurity’s role in protecting farmers from hackers. Jacobsen followed her remarks with a talk on farming technology’s evolution.

“Instead of just learning about technology, students get to work directly with it — exploring how it functions, testing ideas and learning how to troubleshoot and fix problems when things don’t work as planned,” Jacobsen said.

Extension will post online videos and lesson plans detailing additional uses of the robot, including guidance on adding new sensors and programming to complete other tasks. For example, robots could easily be upgraded to conduct soil heat mapping or measure how plants affect air quality.

In June, Jacobsen and Codling plan to host a competition at CEI for students who participated in their robotics classes.

Students will create posters showcasing lessons learned, challenges they’ve overcome and improvements made to robot design, programming or software. Another activity at the competition will involve designing and 3D printing a simple machine to solve a farm-related problem.

Creating a unique program

Jacobsen began exploring robotics for agricultural education in 2023, partnering with Idaho National Laboratory to build Farm-Bot, a 5-foot by 10-foot robot capable of several farm tasks. He built a few miniature versions for classrooms using 3D-printed parts but faced software bugs and challenges with design complexity.

In early 2025, Jacobsen received a \$10,000 Idaho Global Entrepreneurial Mission grant through the state's Higher Education Research Council to develop the program in its current form.

The funding supported a summer collaboration with Cornell University robotics and engineering faculty to create the simplified kit now used in classrooms.

Jacobsen also purchased filament, two 3D printers and enough motherboards, motors, power cords, bearings and other parts to make several more kits, each costing about \$100. Most structural parts in the kits are 3D printed.

The open-source robot design is already being used by 4-H robotics clubs in New York and Wyoming, and Jacobsen plans to involve UI Extension 4-H Youth Development clubs in Ag XRP.

"These robots take abstract concepts like soil moisture, automation and data collection and make them tangible," Jacobsen said. "Students can see, touch and program what they're learning." ■



Aberdeen High School biology students discuss their approach for assembling an irrigation robot.

Country Chuckles

By Jonny Hawkins



"You have an impressive porkfolio."



"Your blood sugar is so high you tested positive for milk duds."

Idaho produced a lot of wheat in 2025

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Idaho’s 2025 wheat crop was a big one but not necessarily one that paid many bills.

Growing conditions for Idaho wheat farmers were great last year and total wheat production in the state was up 5.5 percent compared with 2024.

However, farm-level wheat prices remain depressed and many of the state and nation’s grain farmers are struggling financially.

“Production-wise, it was a good year for a lot of people,” said Burley wheat farmer Wayne Hurst.

In the irrigated areas of southern Idaho, weather conditions were favorable in 2025 for growing wheat and the crop received adequate irrigation water at the right time, he said.

“That allowed the wheat to fill and grow well,” Hurst said. “We saw some very good yields down south in irrigated areas.”

North Idaho and dryland wheat growers also had good yields, he said, and the overall quality of the 2025 Idaho crop was excellent.

2025 was a great growing season for most Idaho crops, not just wheat, said Rupert grain farmer Mike Wilkins.

“Wheat, barley, hay; we had a great year,” he said. “Our yields were good this year. We were record yields this year on everything.”

Farm-level wheat prices are another story and are well below what they were a few years ago.

At the same time, farm production costs remain near record levels. That leaves many Idaho and U.S. wheat farmers struggling financially.

And it’s not just wheat farmers. All crop farmers are struggling right now, said Hamer farmer Justin Place.

While crop prices have declined, “all the input costs needed for growing a crop just continue to rise,” he said.

“The prices are down considerably from what they have been,” Place said.



Photo by Bill Schaefer

Wheat is harvested from an East Idaho field in this file photo.

Meanwhile, “Everything’s getting more expensive. It’s really a struggle for a lot of growers. Nobody likes to lose money.”

The problem for wheat farmers right now is that there is an abundant global supply of wheat, said Hurst, former president of the National Association of Wheat Growers.

That’s not good news for farm-level wheat prices and it’s going to take some time for that abundant supply to clear out, he said.

The good news, he added, is that “long-term, the world is going to need wheat and the U.S. can grow the highest quality and most consistent supply in the world and Idaho is a big part of that.”

Wheat is grown in 42 of Idaho’s 44 counties and according to USDA, there are about 2,600 wheat farms in the state.

Wheat is Idaho’s No. 2 crop in terms of total farm-gate revenue and the state is known for producing a consistent supply of quality wheat almost every year due to the fact much of the wheat produced here is grown under irrigation.

According to USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service, Idaho farmers produced an estimated 106.6 million bushels of wheat in 2025, up 5.5 percent compared

with 2024.

That ranks Idaho as the No. 5 state for total wheat production in 2025.

Idaho farmers planted 1.22 million acres of wheat in 2025, according to USDA.

The average wheat yield in Idaho last year, for irrigated and dryland wheat combined, was estimated by USDA at 93.5 bushels per acre, up 4.5 bushels from 2024 and a little below the record of 96.6 bushels per acre set in 2020.

Total U.S. wheat production in 2025 is estimated by USDA at 1.98 billion bushels, up less than 1 percent from 2024. The average wheat yield in the U.S. for 2025 is estimated at 53.3 bushels per acre.

Idaho, with an average wheat yield of 93.5 bushels per acre, had the highest average wheat yield in the nation among the main wheat-growing states.

Arizona’s yield was 117 bushels per acre, but that state produced 5.7 million bushels of wheat compared with Idaho’s 106.6 million bushels.

California, with an average yield of 90.4 bushels an acre, produced 11.2 million bushels of wheat last year, and Michigan produced 44 million bushels with an average yield of 90 bushels per acre. ■



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DEALING WITH THE AFTERMATH

Managing down and broken trees after wind events

By Audra Cochran and Randy Brooks
University of Idaho Extension

Recent wind events have wreaked havoc on timber stands across much of Idaho and the Pacific Northwest.

Saturated soils combined with prolonged high winds caused numerous trees to uproot or snap off. As a result, many private landowners are surveying the damage and asking a question: What should I do with my down and broken trees?

It's an important question and one that needs to be dealt with sooner rather than later.

Downed and damaged trees can create several challenges for the remaining stand. The more significant concerns involve what this material can attract and how it affects overall forest health.

Insect infestations

Following major disturbance events, insects are quick to take advantage of available host material. Downed trees, broken tops, forked stems, and severely stressed standing trees are prime targets because they emit stress signals that attract bark beetles and other wood-boring insects.

Once insects colonize this material, they can overwinter and reproduce. As temperatures warm, emerging insects may expand their attacks to nearby healthy trees, particularly when large amounts of downed material are left untreated. In some cases, what begins as storm damage can escalate into a broader insect outbreak within a stand.

Not all downed trees serve as beetle habitat. Host suitability depends on tree species and stem size. The three beetle species most likely to breed in downed trees include:

- Pine Engraver Beetle (*Ips pini*): Typically affects pole-sized trees and larger tops. Adults begin flying in late spring and often attack pines that fell during

TOP LEFT: Some trees can survive minor breakage, but extensive damage greatly reduces their likelihood of recovery and may warrant removal by the landowner.; **BOTTOM LEFT:** Downed trees can offer excellent over-wintering habitat for forest insects, making timely removal important. Photos by Audra Cochran

the previous fall or winter. They overwinter in this material, and the next generation emerges in late summer, sometimes attacking nearby standing green pines.

- Douglas-fir Beetle (*Dendroctonus pseudotsugae*): Primarily targets large-diameter, mature Douglas-fir. Adults fly in late spring and attack downed green Douglas-fir, where they feed and reproduce. New adults typically emerge the following spring and summer and can attack remaining live Douglas-fir.
- Fir Engraver Beetle (*Scolytus ventralis*): Commonly associated with grand fir, fir engravers may breed in downed trees or broken tops. Adults emerge and attack green trees from June through September.

In general, downed trees or tops larger than 3–4 inches in diameter should be treated to reduce beetle risk. Options include cutting material into smaller pieces, debarking, burning (where permitted), or removing it entirely.

Many beetles can reproduce in green firewood. If you plan to salvage downed trees for firewood, cut them into smaller pieces to promote rapid curing (drying). Avoid stacking green firewood against live, standing trees, as beetles can move from firewood piles into nearby healthy trees.

Disease concerns

Broken and damaged trees create entry points for disease. Open wounds, exposed sapwood or roots, and stressed root systems provide favorable condi-

tions for fungal pathogens. While not all diseases spread aggressively, large amounts of damaged material can increase disease pressure in stressed forests.

Fire hazard

Down and broken trees increase fuel loading on the forest floor. As this material dries, it can elevate wildfire risk by increasing flame length, fire intensity, and resistance to control. Large accumulations of woody debris function as ladder fuels, allowing fire to move from the ground into the canopy.

When does a snapped-off tree need to come down?

Many landowners are evaluating trees with broken tops or snapped stems and wondering whether those trees can remain standing or should be removed. There's not a single rule that fits every situation, but several practical indicators can help guide decisions.

If the break happened low on the trunk, or most of the canopy is gone, the tree is unlikely to recover. Trees need a good portion of their live crown to produce energy, and when too much foliage is lost, the tree will slowly decline. Trees that are snapped through the middle or lower part of the stem also tend to decay from the inside out. Over time, that decay can lead to instability or windthrow.

You'll also want to look closely at the break itself. If the wood is badly splintered, twisted, or deeply cracked, the tree's structural integrity is compromised. Even if the tree is still standing, it may not be safe to leave in place, especially near homes, driveways, trails, or areas people use regularly.

Although visually unappealing, trees that broke off well above the midpoint and still hold a good amount of foliage with a clean break will sometimes survive. They likely won't regain their original form or value, but can continue to grow and provide shade, cover, and soil stability.

When in doubt, consider getting a second opinion. A consulting forester, certified arborist, or your local University of Idaho Extension or Idaho Department of Lands office can help evaluate damage and discuss management options. A

professional assessment can help you make informed decisions.

So, what should landowners do?

The appropriate response depends on extent of damage, tree species, site conditions, and long-term management goals. However, several general guidelines apply:

- Prioritize high-risk material: Focus first on freshly downed conifers, broken tops, and partially uprooted trees, especially near healthy standing timber.
- Act promptly: Salvage or treatment is most effective before insects have time to establish and reproduce.
- Consider salvage opportunities: Depending on access and volume, downed trees may be usable as sawlogs, firewood, posts, or biomass.
- Reduce fuel loads: Slash treatment, piling and burning (where permitted), or chipping can help lower wildfire risk.
- Retain some material strategically: Not all downed wood is harmful. Scattered, smaller material can provide wildlife habitat and soil benefits, but balance is key.

For sites with extensive damage, landowners may benefit from working with a local logging or fuels treatment contractor. A qualified contractor and consulting forester can help manage cleanup efficiently while minimizing additional site damage.

University of Idaho Extension is available to help connect landowners with science-based resources, management guidance, and professional contacts. Extension educators can assist with evaluating storm damage, identifying potential insect or disease concerns, and discussing the next practical steps aligned with your management goals.

Early help can prevent short-term damage from becoming long-term forest health problems. ■

Audra Cochran and Randy Brooks work for University of Idaho Extension. They can be reached at audrac@uidaho.edu or rbrooks@uidaho.edu.



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105 dB



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Idaho Specialty Crop Block Grant Program

The application for the 2026 Specialty Crop Block Grant is now open. Specialty crop grant funding is provided by the United States Department of Agriculture and is allocated to the state to be awarded through a competitive grant process.

ISDA anticipates receiving an allocation of over \$2 million from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to award to projects that enhance the competitiveness of Idaho specialty crops.

Specialty crops defined by USDA under this program to include fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, nursery crops including floriculture and honey. Projects must enhance the competitiveness of Idaho grown specialty crops in either domestic or foreign markets and must provide a benefit to more than a single organization, institution or individual. Funds are available to interested local, state, and federal government agencies, non-profit and for-profit organizations, and universities.

Projects may include, but are not limited to:

- Increasing child and adult nutrition knowledge and consumption of specialty crops
- Pest and disease control
- Developing new and improved seed varieties and specialty crops
- Improving efficiency and reducing costs of distribution systems
- Developing and enhancing domestic and international markets
- Expanding availability and access to specialty crops
- Improving production practices through innovative technologies
- Improving the capacity of all entities in the specialty crop distribution chain in developing good agricultural, handling, or manufacturing practices.
- Investing in specialty crop research, including research to focus on conservation and environmental outcomes.



Last year, ISDA awarded funding to 13 projects, with an average allocation of \$122,800 each. Projects benefitted beans, garlic, hops, oilseed, onions, potatoes, wine, and more. Activities included domestic and international market expansion and trade facilitation, pest and disease control, crop management and education.

The deadline for submitting all application materials is Sunday, March 8, 2026. Application materials and information are available at www.agri.idaho.gov/scbg.

For more information on grant applications, contact Brenden Meyet at (208) 332-8547 or Brenden.Meyet@isda.idaho.gov.



Photo by Ott Clark

The cattle sector is the long bright spot in Idaho agriculture right now.

Idaho agriculture is a mixed bag right now

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

GARDEN CITY – Idaho's farming sector is a tale of two agricultural economies right now.

On the one hand, the livestock sector, particularly cattle and calves, is doing good. On the other hand, almost everything else, on the crop side, is struggling financially.

"Cattle is king right now," University of Idaho agricultural economist Brett Wilder said during U of I's annual Idaho Ag Outlook Seminar Dec. 17.

But, he added, agriculture overall "continues to suffer from input inflation" and depressed farm-level prices.

About 125 people attended the ag outlook seminar, which included several presenters who provided a look at what is going on now in the agricultural world and offered projections for what 2026 would bring.

The seminar could be summed up like this: cattle good, everything else bad.

U of I agricultural economists estimate Idaho's agricultural industry brought in \$12.1 billion in farm-gate revenue in 2025. That would be a record and it also, by itself, does not tell the whole story.

That record total, if it holds, will have been achieved largely on the back of Idaho's livestock industry. On the crop side, every major crop in Idaho is experiencing lower prices and sometimes dramatically lower prices.

According to a producer sentiment survey by Purdue University, the biggest concern of farmers last year was input costs, said Xiaoli Etienne, a U of I researcher who focuses on commodity risk management.

"Unfortunately, the same concern still holds today," she said. "That speaks volumes on how much pressure our producers have been under...."

Some farm costs, such as liquid fuels and interest rates, are down and others, such as chemicals and machinery and repairs, are mostly flat, she said. But costs for hired labor, fertilizers, farm-land rental rates and electricity are up.

Etienne said USDA forecasts that farm production expenses will increase by 2 percent in 2026.

This year's outlook for most of Idaho's major crops was not good. For example, U of I Extension educator Colby Field did not have great news for the state's grain farmers, who could be facing another year of depressed prices.

The reason is simple: there is plenty of world supply for grains

“Increased risk demands better management. Don’t produce your way to profitability. Manage your way to profitability.”

— Reed Findlay, U of I Extension educator

right now and the supply-and-demand situation is not favorable for higher farm-level prices.

“There’s quite a bit of wheat still available in the world,” Field said. “That puts downward pressure on wheat prices.”

It’s the same for corn and barley, he added.

Hay is one of Idaho’s top three crops in terms of total farm-gate receipts.

“Hay demand has been sluggish,” said U of I Extension educator Reed Findlay. The 2025 growing season was amazing and Idaho farmers produced a lot of high-quality hay, he said.

“Boy, have we got a lot of alfalfa left over and it’s going to be hard to get through,” he said. “That puts downward pressure on the price.”

During this extended period of low farm-level prices, smart management practices are more critical than ever, Findlay said.

“Increased risk demands better management,” he said. “Don’t produce your way to profitability. Manage your way to profitability.”

Findlay offered one positive note for hay producers: low hay prices may have bottomed out.

“I think we are at the bottom of the hay



Photo by Mitchell Searle

Low farm-level crop prices and high production costs have made it difficult for many farmers to cover their costs recently.

market and it could be up from here,” he said.

Farm-level potato prices are also extremely low right now and the outlook for Idaho’s spud farmers is no better than for producers of other crops.

“Most major potato countries had good production conditions in 2025,” said U of I Extension specialist Pat Hatzenbuehler. “There are a lot of potatoes available globally.”

Compared to the crop sector, the state’s livestock sector is doing much better, Wilder said. That’s particularly true of the beef sector, which is carrying the crop sector right now, he said.

The U.S. has its smallest cattle inventory since the 1950s and consumer demand continues to remain high, he said.

“The American consumer has never demanded as much beef as they do now,” Wilder said. “They love beef. Demand for beef has been remarkably strong.”

Milk has traditionally been the state’s top commodity in terms of total farm-gate revenue but may have gotten bumped down to the No. 2 spot in 2025 by the cattle sector. However, since all milk cows eventually are processed, high beef prices are good for the dairy sector.

The global supply of milk is high right now and milk prices moved lower in 2025,

said Dustin Winston, director of business development for StoneX Financial.

“Here’s the kicker,” he said. “Cattle prices have been amazing for dairymen.”

Because of that, he said, we can have relatively low milk prices like we do now “and still be making money because of where the beef price is.”

Looking forward to 2026, Wilder said, crop farmers are expected to continue to struggle financially. And while livestock receipts are expected to retreat a little bit from their highs, they are forecast to remain strong.

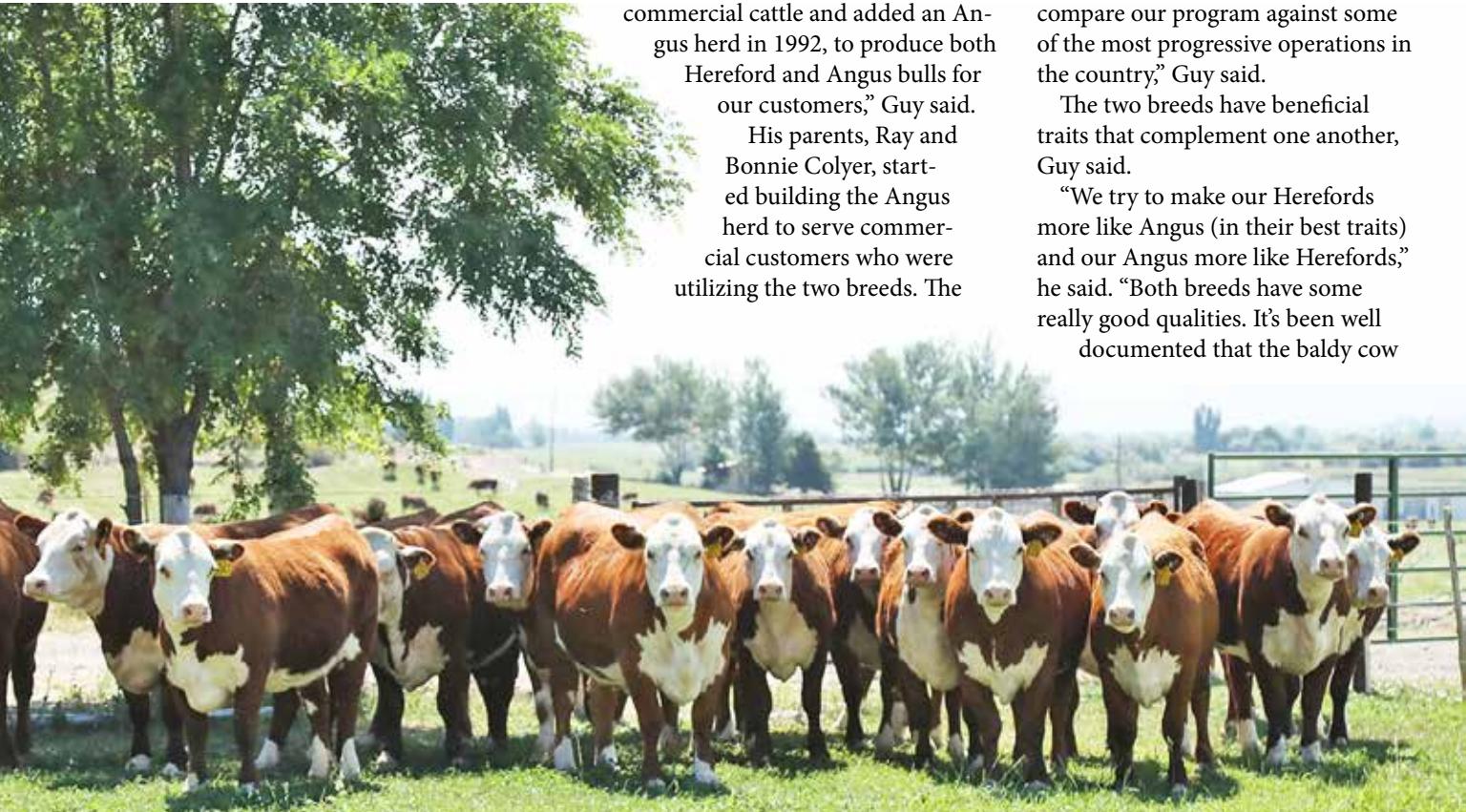
“The crop sector is expected to continue to be squeezed,” he said. “Our inability to keep up with fixed costs is going to continue to weigh on the agricultural sector.”

Doug Robison, the Idaho president for AgWest Farm Credit, said there may be some light at the end of the proverbial tunnel for farmers who have struggled financially recently, but it’s going to take a while to shine through.

“We are going to find our bottom here and going to start to come back up,” he said. “But before we get there, 2026 is going to be a challenging year.” ■

Colyer Herefords raise seedstock in southern Idaho

By Heather Smith Thomas
For Idaho Farm Bureau Federation



Several generations of the Colyer family have been ranching on the high desert along the Snake River, 60 miles southeast of Boise.

Guy Colyer runs the ranch today with the help of his son Kyle.

The ranch was homesteaded in 1933 when Guy's great grandfather rode west in 1878 from Ohio. Guy is third generation, Kyle is fourth and his son Cruz is the fifth generation.

"We started with commercial Herefords and grew the herd to about 700 head, running on BLM allotments," Guy said.

After Guy and his wife Sherry got married in 1976, they started a registered Hereford operation.

Later, they sold their Bureau of Land Management permit and currently run the purebred cattle on deeded and rented private lands. This enabled them to more closely monitor and manage the cattle for individual performance records, with more ability to increase the genetic quality in the directions they wanted to go.

"We eventually phased out the commercial cattle and added an Angus herd in 1992, to produce both

Hereford and Angus bulls for our customers," Guy said.

His parents, Ray and Bonnie Colyer, started building the Angus herd to serve commercial customers who were utilizing the two breeds. The

black-baldy is a popular cross.

The switch from commercial to purebred brought changes to the operation, but the basics remained the same. The ranch produces all the necessary feed: alfalfa hay, corn silage and barley. The sale bulls are grown on corn silage and chopped hay.

"We are very familiar with the commercial industry since we ran our cattle in rough areas for many years and know what our customers need," Guy said. "Our main purpose is to produce the best bulls for our commercial customers here in the West."

These bulls must be hardy and durable.

Many of their customers run cattle in less-than-ideal conditions, so the Colyers try to match breeds and cattle that can adapt and survive in harsher environments. Hereford and Angus are proven breeds that can thrive, re-breed and give acceptable performance and carcass quality.

"Our cattle have done well in the show ring and it's been good for us to compete with other breeders and compare our program against some of the most progressive operations in the country," Guy said.

The two breeds have beneficial traits that complement one another, Guy said.

"We try to make our Herefords more like Angus (in their best traits) and our Angus more like Herefords," he said. "Both breeds have some really good qualities. It's been well documented that the baldy cow

has increased fertility and longevity, which is helpful for these desert operations."

"This has been our emphasis in terms of marketing and supplying bulls; we want to provide the best of the two best breeds," he added. "On the Herefords, we've worked hard on the feedlot and carcass traits; they needed more marbling. We've been using some high-marbling bulls in our program and it's been paying off, to increase the value of the end product."

He said the challenge is to produce superior carcass animals and still keep the maternal aspects of the two breeds in balance. By identifying those highly heritable traits and selecting for them, he feels they can make a lot of progress in a short time.

"On the Angus, we select for better disposition," he said. "My dad used to help us calve and he was in his mid-80s. He'd get the Angus cows into little pens and I'd go tag and tattoo the calves. We always wanted quiet Angus cattle. The Angus also needed to improve feet and legs and structure, so we've put selection emphasis on structure and soundness."

He said each breed needed some improvements.

"Now our Herefords are comparable to our Angus cows in udder quality, a big improvement over 20 years ago," Guy said. "The Herefords have really changed in terms of milk and udders. When you are a kid, you don't mind doing some of the things we had to do, but as you get older you don't want to deal with problems."

"We are proud we've been able to stay in business this long and have tried to meet the demands of our commercial customers," Guy said. "It's nice to see their success as well. It's a partner relationship between the commercial cattlemen and purebred breeders, so we feel it's been important to be able to produce bulls that have gone all over the U.S. and into Mexico and Canada. We've had a lot of foreign buyers for semen and embryos, but our main focus is the commercial ranchers."

The ranch's embryo transplant program started in 1982.

"We rely on a good AI program and a lot of embryo transplant calves so we can use the very best genetics," Guy said. "This gives our bull buyers the ability to



Several generations of the Colyer family have been ranching along the Snake River southeast of Boise.

purchase large groups of full brothers, half-brothers, $\frac{3}{4}$ brothers, etc. We use all the technology available to propagate top-end genetics."

A few years ago, the ranch started tagging the cows with monitors to detect heat, to facilitate breeding with artificial insemination.

"The computer shows when a cow has elevated temperature and when it starts back down, we pen and breed her," Guy said. "We use all the technology we can to improve conception rates. We also have an extensive computer program that enables us to easily track pedigrees ... matings, preg-check rates and all the vaccinations the cattle have had since birth, along with customer records."

Guy and Sherry have two children, Kyle and Katie. Kyle spent two years on a livestock judging team at Colby College in Kansas, then graduated from Kansas State University with a bachelor's degree in animal science.

Kyle is on the ranch full time now and his children are the fourth generation on the ranch.

Katie graduated from Kansas State

University with a degree in animal science-business. She works on sale preparations on the ranch and does the pictures and videos, website updates and social media. She works with LiveAuctions.tv, travels to sales across the country and has her own video production company, Crystal Clear Creations.

Guy has been involved with the Owyhee County Cattle Association, Idaho Cattle Association, National Cattlemen's Beef Association, and served as an American Hereford Association board director.

He was inducted into the Hereford Hall of Fame at the annual Hereford meeting in Kansas City in October 2019. Sherry has been involved with the American Hereford Auxiliary and has testified on the Endangered Species Act in Washington, D.C.

They have both been American Junior Hereford Association advisors.

"Not only is the family devoted to the success of the ranch, but we also have loyal and devoted employees," Guy said. "It is a team effort from everyone involved; we are all working together for a common goal." ■



The Hasselstroms' unique sheep enterprise

By Heather Smith Thomas
For Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

Sheila and Eric Hasselstrom raise sheep and a few cattle on their dryland farm near Winchester, 45 miles south of Lewiston.

"Eric's grandfather had Herefords on this place, and we had a few cattle as well as crops," Sheila says. "About 16

years ago, a rancher owed us money for hay and paid us with 50 sheep. That was the start of our sheep operation and we eventually sold the cows."

She says Winchester was originally a timber town and they farm a lot of cut-over timber land. Eric and Sheila, their three kids and a few hired hands did all the farming.

"Our sheep flock grew because of the



ABOVE AND LEFT: Sheila and Eric Hasselstrom raise sheep and a few cattle on their dryland farm near Winchester. Submitted photos

“The 2020 market was terrible, so I started a direct-to-consumer business with the local farmers market. Today, many people want to buy direct. They want to know the person who raised the meat, and how it was raised.”

– Sheila Hasselstrom

way we are able to utilize them,” she says. “We’d always been cattle people, but there are many acres here that could be grazed more readily by sheep. We also began to use the sheep to improve our cropland, and as fire mitigation in areas that had not been grazed before.”

The farm has been a no-till operation for the past 35 years, which has improved the microbe levels in the soil, Sheila says. She says the sheep help keep the soil healthier and control the weeds.

“I took over the sheep because it was easier for me to handle sheep than cows and we started expanding the sheep numbers,” Sheila says.

In 2019, she purchased another group and when she lambed in March 2020, she had 650 ewes that lambed out 950 lambs.

“We do a lot of cover cropping and have a lot of farm ground we moved the sheep across, doing rotational grazing with portable electric fencing,” Sheila says.

She says she realized that if she was going to grow the flock larger, she needed a herder instead of using electric fences, so she hired herder through the federal agricultural guest worker program.

For several years, she ran the sheep on their place in Idaho until October, grazing all the fields and pastures, then weaned and marketed lambs. In mid-October, she took the sheep to the Columbia Basin in Washington to graze grass-seed fields until February when the sheep were sheared. The grass-seed growers wanted their fields grazed after harvesting seed.

She marketed lambs several ways and also sold butcher lambs locally.

“The 2020 market was terrible, so I started a direct-to-consumer business with the local farmers market,” she said. “Today, many people want to buy direct. They want to know the person who raised the meat, and how it was raised.”

She now has a website – WRF.farm – and is currently focusing more on this, since she had to reduce the sheep numbers and no longer sells big loads of lambs.

“In 2023, the market for bluegrass seed crashed so we were no longer able to graze in Washington in winter,” Sheila says. “About 30,000 acres of grass was torn out in the Columbia Basin area where we grazed.”



Sheila Hasselstrom is shown with some of her operation’s sheep.

“Between that, and the higher cost of … labor, we decided to sell most of our sheep,” she says. “We sold nearly 900 head to a family in Utah. I kept some, however, because they are our best weed control and also improve our soil health.”

She kept about 80 head—older ewes and some ewe lambs—and started looking at new breeds.

“I decided to try the Australian White hair sheep to see how they do here in the winter,” she says. “I found a gal in Missouri with an Australian White ram she was breeding to some of her Katahdin ewes, a breed raised just for meat and not wool.”

Sheila bought some of those ewes and is currently lambing them out.

“I thought this might be a way to keep sheep on our farm and continue to do direct-to-consumer sales,” she says. “We’ve been doing farmers markets for four years and selling lamb meat in our local area. Our lamb is becoming popular....”

Sheila and Eric still farm about 3,000 acres, including pastures.

“With regenerative farming, keeping animals on the land is very important,” she says. “When we had 900 sheep, it was very efficient to use them to improve the soil, and easy to do. We recently bought some cows to fill in for our lack of sheep.”

They purchased a small herd of Aberdeen Lowline Angus to produce smaller carcasses.

“This is all some people can afford, and many folks don’t have a lot of freezer space, so a smaller carcass is more practical,” Sheila says. “We decided to sell smaller animals, and the Lowlines are supposed to finish out better on grass; they are very efficient, without needing grain.”

She says this is also the idea behind the Australian Whites.

“They produce very good grass-fed lambs,” she says. “They are all meat, no wool, so you can focus on meat production.” ■

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FEBRUARY 21-28, 2026



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MONDAY



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