GEM STATE Producer
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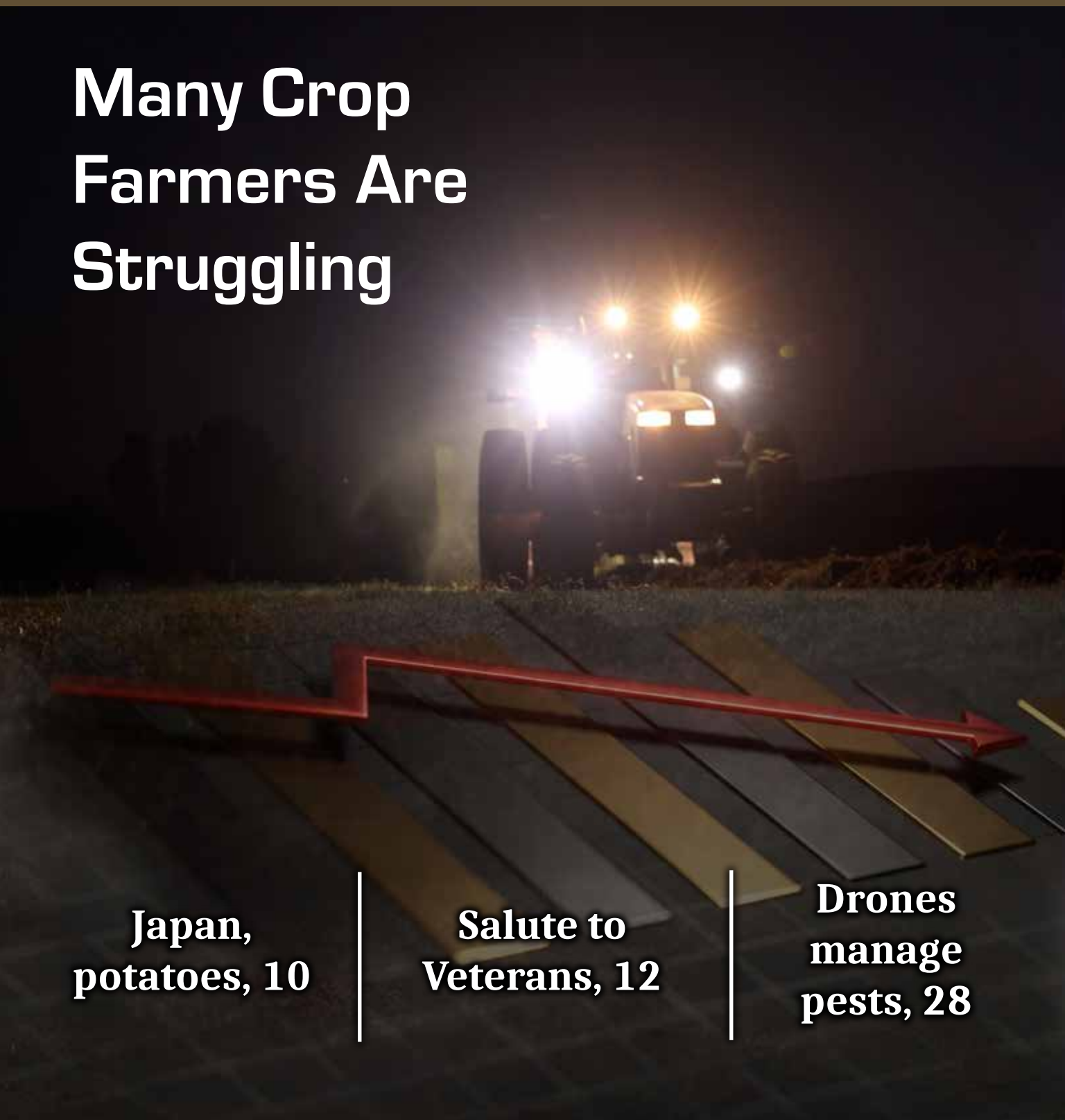
Many Crop Farmers Are Struggling



Japan, potatoes, 10

Salute to Veterans, 12

Drones manage pests, 28

The Zipline

By Zippy Duvall
President, American Farm Bureau Federation

Farm State of Mind Alliance: a new chapter in taking care of our own

Farming has always taken resilience. But it takes honesty, too. Honesty about the stress, worry and exhaustion, which so many farmers and ranchers carry quietly.

When I talk with farmers and ranchers across the country, I hear stories that are both familiar and deeply personal.

Markets swing overnight. Weather doesn't cooperate. The cost to raise a crop keeps rising. And even on the good days, there's the constant weight of responsibility—to our families, to our land, and to the legacy we're building for the next generation.

That's a lot for anyone to shoulder.

We don't always talk about the impact these pressures have on our mental wellness, but we should. Because, sadly, the truth is farmer

See **DUVALL,** page 6

The President's Desk

By Bryan Searle
President, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

Until next time and … never forget

I've never really liked the words good-bye but rather "until next time."

Over 10 years ago when I first ran for president of Idaho Farm Bureau Federation, my wife Mary and I discussed how long I planned to serve as president. We were even asked that question by some Farm Bureau members.

The answer was quick and simple: between eight to 12 years if the members chose to reelect me every two years. Our desire was to give our all in bettering this great organization.

About two and half years ago, Mary and I again had several discussions about how long I would serve as president.

I was months away from completing my fourth term, making it eight years total as IFBF president, and we decided then that I would seek reelection for my last term.

Now, as my time as IFBF president ends, I have to say, it's been such a privilege to represent farmers and ranchers across the state on both state and national issues.

See **SEARLE,** page 6

Inside Farm Bureau

By Zak Miller
CEO, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

We are not us without you

At a recent Farm Bureau meeting, Idaho State Senator Mark Harris spoke about the trials facing most farmers this year. As I listened, my mind wandered to a troubling observation: in agricultural markets, a bright spot in any commodity too often feels like a shooting star against the backdrop of a dark sky.

Perhaps I'm overly sensitive, but this year, with the exception of the cattle market, has felt especially painful.

Unfortunately, I don't think I'm wrong.

As Senator Harris concluded his remarks, he offered the oft repeated saying of nearly all farmers: "There is always next year."

The crowd, primarily farmers, chuckled and nodded in agreement. They have learned that markets correct, but on their own time, and that good farmers manage through the ups and downs.

Will Rogers probably said it best when he

See **MILLER,** page 7

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COVER: See page 4 for a story on how many farmers are facing tough financial times right now. Photo design by Joel Benson

Table of Contents

Farmers are facing dire times financially

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Idaho and U.S. farmers are currently facing tough financial challenges and many are struggling to stay in business.

Farm input costs are hovering at record levels, while the prices that farmers receive for many of their crops continue to decline, in some cases dramatically.

As an example, the average price that Idaho farmers received for 100 pounds of fresh Russet table potatoes in 2024 was $6.54, according to North American Potato Market News. So far this year, that average price is $4.40.

The NAPM Grower Return Index shows that Idaho farmers this year are receiving an average of $1.97 for each 100 pounds of potatoes they produce, after transportation and other expenses are factored in. That's compared to $7.19 in 2024.

To further put the situation in perspective, the break-even point for Idaho potato farmers right now is about $9 per 100 pounds of potatoes they produce, said NAPM owner Ben Eborn.

This means farmers are on average receiving way less for their potatoes than what it costs to grow them.

"When your break-even cost on potatoes is $10 per hundred pounds and they're offering you $2, it's pretty tough," said southeast Idaho potato grower Ray Searle.

As further example of how much farm-level crop prices have declined recently, total farm-gate revenue for hay in Idaho declined 38 percent in 2024 compared with 2023, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Farm-gate revenue is what the farmer receives for their commodity.

Revenue from hops in Idaho dropped 24 percent during that same period, barley revenue was down 18 percent, potato revenue declined 7 percent, and revenue from wheat fell 2 percent.

"Your costs right now are so much more than what you're getting for your crop,"

A safflower field near Preston is harvested. Farmers are facing tough financial times right now, as agricultural commodity prices keep declining while production costs hold near record levels. Photo by Jacob Christensen

"The input prices this year are atrocious. It's going to be a tough year. We'll hold it together, but it's a tough son of a gun out there."

– Mike Wilkins, Rupert farmer

Searle said. "It's everything. All commodity prices –potatoes, corn, hay, sugar beets, grain – are in the toilet right now."

Total net farm income in Idaho in 2024 was down 13 percent from 2023 and 30 percent lower compared with 2022, according to USDA.

It's at least as difficult this year for agricultural producers, said Teton farmer Dwight Little.

"On the crop side, it's pretty tough right now," he said. "Everything is in the tank right now, except cattle and calves. Thank goodness we have some cows. They really help."

"Expenses have gone up 30 percent or more over the last three or four years while farm commodity prices are the same or worse," said New Plymouth farmer Galen Lee. "Input costs have gone up, but we're not selling our commodities for any more."

While USDA forecasts total U.S. revenue from the livestock sector will be up this year, it's the opposite for the crop sector.

According to USDA data released Sept. 3, the total value of crop production in Idaho was $4.8 billion in 2024, down 12 percent from 2023.

Rupert farmer Mike Wilkins said 2025 is no better on the crop side. Farm input costs are holding at or near record levels, while the price that farmers are receiving for their commodity continues to decline, he said.

"The input prices this year are atrocious," Wilkins said. "It's going to be a tough year. We'll hold it together, but it's a tough son of a gun out there."

The USDA data shows intermediate farm production expenses in Idaho totaled $7.2 billion in 2024, up 6 percent from 2023. Intermediate farm expenses include things like feed and seed purchases, fertilizers, pesticides, fuel, electricity, marketing, storage and transportation.

"Everything costs more for the farmer and it's just awful.," said Bear Lake rancher and farmer Jim Parker. "It's just bad all around."

When total farm production expenses are added up, total net farm income for Idaho's 22,000-plus farmers and ranchers in 2024 came in at $2.6 billion, down 13 percent from 2023 and down 30 percent compared with 2022.

Net farm income is what's left over after total expenses are deducted from total income. Think of it as the farmer's paycheck and it's down 30 percent over the past two years.

The USDA's Sept. 3 report included the first state-level estimates of farm income for 2024. The total farm production costs and revenue projections for 2025 will be released late next summer.

The USDA data show that total farm and ranch production expenses in Idaho continue to rise in most categories. For example, total expenses for livestock and poultry purchases hit $1 billion in 2024, up from $808 million in 2023. Seed purchases totaled $420 million, up from $361 million.

Total statewide expenses for pesticide purchases hit $379 million in 2024, up from $332 million in 2023, total fertilizer costs hit $750 million, up from $609 million, and expenses for machine hire and custom work totaled $167 million, up from $112 million.

Total Idaho irrigation expenses in 2024 hit $106 million, up from $84 million in 2023.

Some expenses did decrease.

For example, total feed purchases in Idaho dropped from $2.4 billion in 2023 to $2.2 billion in 2024, total fuel and oil costs decreased from $378 million to $365 million, and marketing, storage and transportation costs dropped from $220 million to $208 million.

But when everything was tallied up – total farm and ranch production income minus expenses – the data shows that the average paycheck for Idaho's farms and ranches decreased substantially in 2024 compared with 2023 and was down by almost a third from 2022.

According to farmers, the financial situation in farm country won't be any better in 2025. Idaho experienced good growing conditions this year, they said, and crop yields were generally good and in some cases very good.

But farm-level commodity prices are so low, they won't make up for the good growing year, said Oakley potato farmer Randy Hardy.

"They're about down to where they can't get any lower," he said.

"We have good yields, but it's a challenge with low prices," said Ririe farmer Clark Hamilton. "We have to tighten our belts and get through this tough time." ■

DUVALL

Continued from page 2

suicide rates are two to five times higher than the national average.

Behind those numbers are people we know—neighbors, friends and family members—who have struggled in silence for too long.

At Farm Bureau, we believe that strength is not measured in bushels or bales. It's measured in our willingness to look out for one another. To admit, "I'm not okay," and to say, "You're not alone."

That belief has fueled our work to make mental health resources accessible and practical for farmers and our rural communities. And this year, we're taking another big step forward.

I'm so proud that American Farm Bureau is joining forces with Farm Foundation's Farm Family Wellness Alliance to create the new Farm State of Mind Alliance.

This is the next phase of our ongoing commitment to rural mental wellness. This expanded coalition brings together agricultural organizations across the country with a shared goal: to make sure every farm family has the resources they need to take care of their mental health.

The Alliance builds on the progress we have made through Farm State of Mind, advancing access to tools, training and support that meet people where they are.

Our resources include programs like Togetherall, a 24/7 online peer-to-peer community moderated by licensed mental health professionals, and Personal Assistance Services, which provides confidential counseling, financial consultations, and stress management resources to anyone who needs them.

'Together, we can make sure that when the next generation takes over the fields and herds we have built, they inherit a culture that values mental wellness just as much as hard work.'

These services are completely free to farm families nationwide.

What makes this effort powerful isn't just the programs themselves. It's the fact that agriculture is coming together to lead the charge.

We are combining the trusted voices of organizations farmers already know, starting with our founding members—Farm Bureau, National Farmers Union, National 4-H Council and Farm Foundation—to reach further and respond faster.

The Alliance will amplify the impact of Farm State of Mind, allowing for greater reach into rural communities.

Whether you're looking for help, or just want to support the cause, there's a place for you in the Farm State of Mind Alliance.

Partners, advocates and neighbors can all play a part by sharing these resources, starting conversations, and helping to break down the stigma around mental health.

We've seen the difference it makes when one person reaches out. All it takes is asking a friend how they're really doing, or sharing a resource that might just save a life.

Those small steps are how we show each other: "It's okay not to be okay, and it's okay to ask for help."

The health of our farms depends on the health of our farmers. Together, we can make sure that when the next generation takes over the fields and herds we have built, they inherit a culture that values mental wellness just as much as hard work. ■

SEARLE

Continued from page 2

I know this is one of the greatest organizations in the nation. It is the strongest unified voice of agriculture. As President Lincoln famously said, agriculture is the basis of civilization. Never forget that.

In everything I've done – whether it has been in Idaho or throughout the nation, particularly in Washington, D.C. – I have tried my best to serve the interests of farmers and ranchers here in Idaho.

I have strived to do this whether it involved testifying before

'It's the grassroots farmers and ranchers that make up the various county Farm Bureaus that are the real power of Idaho Farm Bureau Federation and American Farm Bureau Federation.'

Congress or the Idaho Legislature, or speaking to the person next to me on an airplane or the cashier at the grocery store.

It has been one of the greatest privileges of my life to spend the last decade working on behalf of this state's 22,000-plus farms and ranches. Agriculture truly is the backbone of Idaho's economy and way of life. Never forget that.

As I leave the position of IFBF president, I want to remind people of the important role that the Idaho Farm Bureau serves in developing policies that are the marching orders for this great organization. I point out that these policies are developed, vetted and voted on by real farmers and ranchers.

Our policy starts out as an idea in the mind of a farmer or rancher at the grassroots level. If an agricultural producer can convince their local county Farm Bureau to support this policy, it eventually ends up being debated at our annual meeting, where it is voted on by farmers and ranchers who serve as voting delegates from other county Farm Bureaus around the state.

If a majority of those voting delegates support the policy, it goes into our IFBF policy book, which serves as the road map for this organization. Policies that involve national issues go into the American Farm Bureau Federation policy book.

My job has been to represent our members with this policy both in Idaho and nationally.

Our policy is what makes the Farm Bureau strong and it is developed by you. Never forget that.

It's the grassroots farmers and ranchers that make up the various county Farm Bureaus that are the real power of Idaho Farm Bureau Federation and American Farm Bureau Federation.

IFBF has a board of directors – they're all farmers and ranchers – and fulltime staff that work every day to turn our policy into reality. But please never lose track of the fact that the power of Farm Bureau really does lie in the county Farm Bureaus.

And you, Mr. and Mrs. Farmer, are what makes the county Farm Bureaus go. You are the ones that give the board, president and staff our orders. Never forget that.

So, until next time I'll see you down the country road. And, again, it has been a special privilege and honor to work on your behalf for these past 10 years. Thank you. ■

MILLER

Continued from page 2

observed, "The farmer has to be an optimist, or he wouldn't still be a farmer."

This belief in better days, better seasons, greater yields, and higher prices is what keeps you in this business.

I am continually impressed by the steadfast resilience and grit of farmers and ranchers. Between unforgiving work and unforgiving markets, it truly requires a special soul to provide for a family from the soil.

Let me personally say thank you. Throughout my life, I have always known where there are ample supplies of food. I have never had to base my day on finding food.

While hunger exists in our communities – this is a travesty we must address – it is not due to scarcity or lack of food. There are other battles to fight, but empty store shelves are not one of them.

I cannot adequately express to the farmers and ranchers of Idaho how much my family and I, along with millions more, need you to continue doing what you do. Our lives are not what they are without what you do.

'A farmer, even one who no longer farms, is always a farmer, and we all need you.'

In complex markets, it breaks my heart knowing that inevitably some may not have a "next year" due to the circumstances of agriculture. For those facing this reality, we all will mourn with you over this loss. We are not better without you.

Our communities miss each farmer and rancher who no longer farms. The loss is irreplaceable, even if the cows and crops remain under another farmer's hand.

But this is a loss that can be absorbed because you are still here. Your story, your integrity, you are still among us. A farmer, even one who no longer farms, is always a farmer, and we all need you.

Please, I beg each of you as you struggle through these challenges: the greatest gift you will ever give us – all of your neighbors – is YOU.

If circumstances require that there cannot be another year of farming, as hard as that may be, please know we are willing to mourn with you. But please, please do not cause us to mourn YOU. You are always greater than just the crop produce, and we are not us without you.

There are so many who love you and care. ■

Resources for support:

FARMAID - Call 1-800-FARMAID (1-800-327-6243)

Suicide Prevention Hotline - Call 988 for free and confidential support

For **Idaho Farm and Ranch Stress Resources**, visit https://agri.idaho.gov/marketing/farm-ranch-center/farm-stress/

U of I hires new director of Parma center

By John O'Connell
University of Idaho

PARMA – University of Idaho has hired an entomologist with more than seven years of experience in agricultural research to be the director of the Idaho Foundation Seed Program and the Parma Research and Extension Center.

Chris Caron has worked as a research technician for the wheat breeding program at Nutrient Ag Solutions in Bozeman, Montana, since 2023. He started in his new role with U of I on Dec. 1.

Foundation seed is the initial seed generation produced under strict conditions to be used for growing certified seed, which farmers plant to raise food crops with high genetic purity, high germination rates and minimal contamination. Foundation seed is raised from breeder seed, which is the first generation of a new crop variety that has been developed by a plant breeder.

Caron will manage the statewide production of foundation seed for the program, which maintains about 120 varieties of wheat, barley, oats, beans, potatoes, peas, chickpeas, lentils, rapeseed, grasses, forbs and forage legumes.

He'll also be charged with ensuring rules and regulations are followed in the production of breeder and certified seed, while maintaining seed production sites and the storage of seed lots throughout the state. Furthermore, he'll oversee daily operations at the Parma research facility, which recently opened a state-of-the-art new laboratory called the Idaho Center for Plant and Soil Health.

"I'm excited to lead the Foundation Seed Program toward continued growth and excellence, and I look forward to working with (everyone at Parma) in optimizing the … station's potential for research, outreach and Extension," Caron said.

Caron graduated with a biology degree from Franklin Pierce University in Rindge, New Hampshire, in 2013. From 2017 through 2023, he managed the applied entomology research lab at Montana State University, earning a master's degree in land resources and environmental science from MSU in 2019.

His master's thesis focused on the integrated pest management of wheat stem sawfly in spring wheat. He was also involved in multi-state insecticide trials for managing alfalfa weevils, and he planted, maintained and harvested wheat seed-treatment trials for the management of wireworms in spring wheat.

"I've been fortunate to work with Montana's farmers through applied research, both at MSU and Nutrien Ag Solutions," Caron said. "These experiences have deepened my appreciation for the seed industry and strengthened my commitment to supporting agricultural innovation."

Caron sought the position at U of I after Nutrien announced it would be eliminating its wheat breeding program.

"He quickly adapted to the research position with enthusiasm and an abundance of energy, and he has been a valuable member of the program since that time," said Dale Clark, senior breeder with Nutrien and Caron's supervisor. "Also, his knowledge of entomology has enhanced our understanding of the insects affecting wheat production in Montana — Hessian fly, wheat stem sawfly and the orange wheat blossom midge — insects that can also create problems in Idaho." ■

RIGHT: **Christ Caron;** ABOVE: **Chris Caron starts Dec. 1 as the new director of the Idaho Foundation Seed Program and the University of Idaho's Parma Research and Extension Center.** Photos courtesy of Chris Caron

File photo

The domestic potato industry is pushing hard to get Japan to allow market access for fresh U.S. potatoes.

U.S-Japan agreement does not include fresh potato access

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Idaho and U.S. potato farmers had hopes that the recent trade agreement with Japan would include market access for fresh U.S. potatoes.

It did not.

This quashes hopes, at least for now, that Japan will finally allow the import of fresh U.S. potatoes.

Japan is a major destination for processed potatoes from the United States, but it does not allow fresh U.S potato imports.

The National Potato Council estimates that if full market access for fresh U.S. potatoes to Japan is realized, it would result in an additional $150 million per year in exports.

"It is very disappointing that the U.S. was unable to use President Trump's tariff leverage to push past Japan's protectionism and finally open this valuable market," National Potato Council CEO Kam Quarles said in an Oct. 31 news release.

Japan has delayed this market access request from the U.S. for 30 years, he said.

According to the NPC news release, the meeting this week between President Trump and Prime Minister Takaichi did not include any mention of U.S. fresh potato access, nor was any reference made to it in follow-up statements.

Idaho leads the nation in total potato production and the state's farmers produce about 14 billion pounds of potatoes every year, which is about a third of the nation's total spud supply.

With current farm-level potato prices well below the cost of

"It was disappointing for it not to be in the agreement. It's a valuable market … so we're going to keep at it."

– Kam Quarles, National Potato Council CEO

production, achieving the goal of exporting fresh U.S. potatoes to Japan would have been a major win for Idaho and the rest of the domestic spud industry.

In April 2024, a bipartisan group of 10 U.S. senators, including both of Idaho's senators, sent a letter to then-president Biden urging him to continue to push Japan to allow access to fresh U.S. potatoes.

According to the letter, fresh potato access to Japan was first requested almost three decades ago.

Despite the efforts of USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Farming and Fisheries (MAFF) "continues to delay substantive technical discussions on (fresh potato) access," the letter states.

"This marks the fifth year of discussions without any forward progress by MAFF to resolve this decades-long issue," it adds.

The bipartisan letter states that there is "no valid phytosanitary justification for these delays, as the U.S. potato industry has a strong history of exporting fresh potatoes to many markets, including South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand. These exports occur safely and routinely throughout the year, providing benefits both for consumers in the Indo-Pacific and our growers here in the United States."

According to the NPC news release, USDA and MAFF officials held talks earlier in October where Japan again provided no timeline for concluding the three-decade request.

"Earlier this year, President Trump's announcement of tariffs upon Japan provided significant leverage to finally end the Japanese strategy of negotiation-without-conclusion," the NPC news release states.

Quarles said that despite the disappointment, NPC was pleased by U.S. Chief Agriculture Negotiator-nominee Julie Callahan's comments Oct. 29 before the Senate Finance Committee, "where she acknowledged Japan's delaying strategy is a non-tariff trade barrier. This has been stated by our industry for years, and we very much appreciate (her) clear assessment and focused intent to open this market to benefit family farms across the U.S."

Quarles told Idaho Farm Bureau Federation that President Trump has generated a lot of leverage with U.S. tariffs and NPC did not want that leverage to go unused on this issue.

"It was disappointing for it not to be in the agreement," he said.

But, he added, Callahan's recent comments are "a very clear signal to us that (the administration is) going to dig in on this. At least they recognize, finally, what Japan is up to on this issue."

"It's a valuable market … so we're going to keep at it," he added.

Gaining access for fresh U.S. potatoes to Japan would not only be a win for the domestic spud industry, it would also be a win for the nation.

According to a first-of-its-kind NPC report, the U.S. potato sector had an estimated $101 billion impact on the nation's economy in 2021.

According to that "Spud Nation" report, about 20% of American potatoes are exported, which results in an almost $4.8 billion economic impact on the nation's economy and supports almost 34,000 jobs.

The report also found that export markets are an important avenue for the U.S. potato sector. About 20 percent of the spuds grown in the United States are exported, either as fresh or processed potatoes. ■

Idaho Farm Bureau salutes veterans

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Idaho Farm Bureau employees saluted hundreds of local U.S. military veterans for their service Nov. 7 during the 13th Annual Farm Bureau Salute to Idaho Veterans.

The event takes place at the Farm Bureau Insurance Co. of Idaho headquarters in Pocatello and involves hundreds of veterans from the community and surrounding region.

"What a privilege to be here with you. I welcome you here to Farm Bureau and I thank you for your service," Idaho Farm Bureau Federation President Bryan Searle told veterans. "You're remembered and you're appreciated. Thank you very much for your service."

"Thank all of you for your service ... It's an honor to host you," said Todd Argall, president of Farm Bureau Insurance Co. of Idaho.

Argall, the son of a Korean War vet, told the veterans that the annual event is put on by Farm Bureau employees who consider it the highlight of their year.

"Their heart and soul goes into this event," he said. "They tell us regularly that this is the most important event for them throughout the year."

The Salute to Idaho Veterans is held before Veteran's Day so it won't interfere with the events held on that day by veterans' organizations.

It includes a flag ceremony, a guest speaker, a free veteran group photo and individual photos for each veteran, and a complimentary Salute to Idaho Veterans commemorative coin.

LEFT: **Hundreds of military veterans joined Idaho Farm Bureau employees Nov. 7 for the organization's annual Salute to Idaho Veterans.** Photos by Bill Schaefer

The guest speaker this year was Capt. Chris Cassidy, a former U.S. Navy SEAL and NASA astronaut.

His 28-year career included four deployments –two to Afghanistan and two to the Mediterranean – and three missions to space.

He also led numerous combat missions.

During his NASA career, he spent 378 days in space and completed 10 spacewalks totaling almost 55 hours.

Cassidy said he has been privileged to travel around the country and attend a lot of veterans and military events "and I have to tell you, this is special. A special thanks to the Farm Bureau for putting this on … I'm so honored to be a part of (this celebration)."

The three winners of Farm Bureau's Veterans Day essay contest for students – "What my family member's service means to me" – read their winning entries during the event.

The 1st through 6th grade contest was won by Blake Collins of Pocatello, who won $250 for her winning entry.

The winner of the 7th through 9th grade category and a $500 prize was Eden Brown of Mountain Home Air Force Base.

The 10th through 12th grade contest was won by Felicity Mollett of Pocatello, who received $750 for her winning entry. ■

TOP: **Military veterans from around the Pocatello region attended Farm Bureau's annual Salute to Idaho Veterans Nov. 7.**
ABOVE: **Idaho Farm Bureau Federation President Bryan Searle and his wife, Mary, left, and Todd Argall, CEO of Farm Bureau Insurance Co. of Idaho, right, join the guest speaker, Capt. Chris Cassidy, Nov. 7 during Farm Bureau's annual Salute to Idaho Veterans event.**

Back to whole? How school milk could shift dairy demand

By Daniel Munch
American Farm Bureau Federation Economist

More than a decade after whole milk was removed from school cafeterias, Congress is reconsidering whether students should have the freedom to enjoy it – and its many nutrients.

The Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act (H.R. 649/S. 222) would overturn USDA's 2012 restrictions that have limited schools to providing only fat-free or 1% milk. The proposal, which aligns with recommendations from the Make America Healthy Again Commission, comes as policymakers, farmers and processors look to revitalize a category that has steadily lost market share and reconnect children to the benefits and taste of milk.

Behind the policy debate lies a broader market story: U.S. milk production is on pace to reach a record high in 2025 even as fluid consumption continues to decline. Allowing whole milk back into schools could provide a small but meaningful outlet for butterfat, a key driver of farm milk value, while giving local dairies new opportunities to serve their communities.

Background: shifting dairy consumption

Fluid milk consumption in the U.S. has fallen nearly 50% since 1975 (from 247 pounds per person to 128 pounds in 2023), including a 28% drop since 2010. The decline is not uniform across dairy products, however. Cheese consumption, including cottage cheese, more than doubled from 18.8 pounds per person in 1975 to 42.3 pounds in 2023 (+124%). Butter use climbed from 4.7 to 6.5 pounds (+37%), and yogurt intake surged over 600%, from 1.9 to 13.8 pounds over the same period.

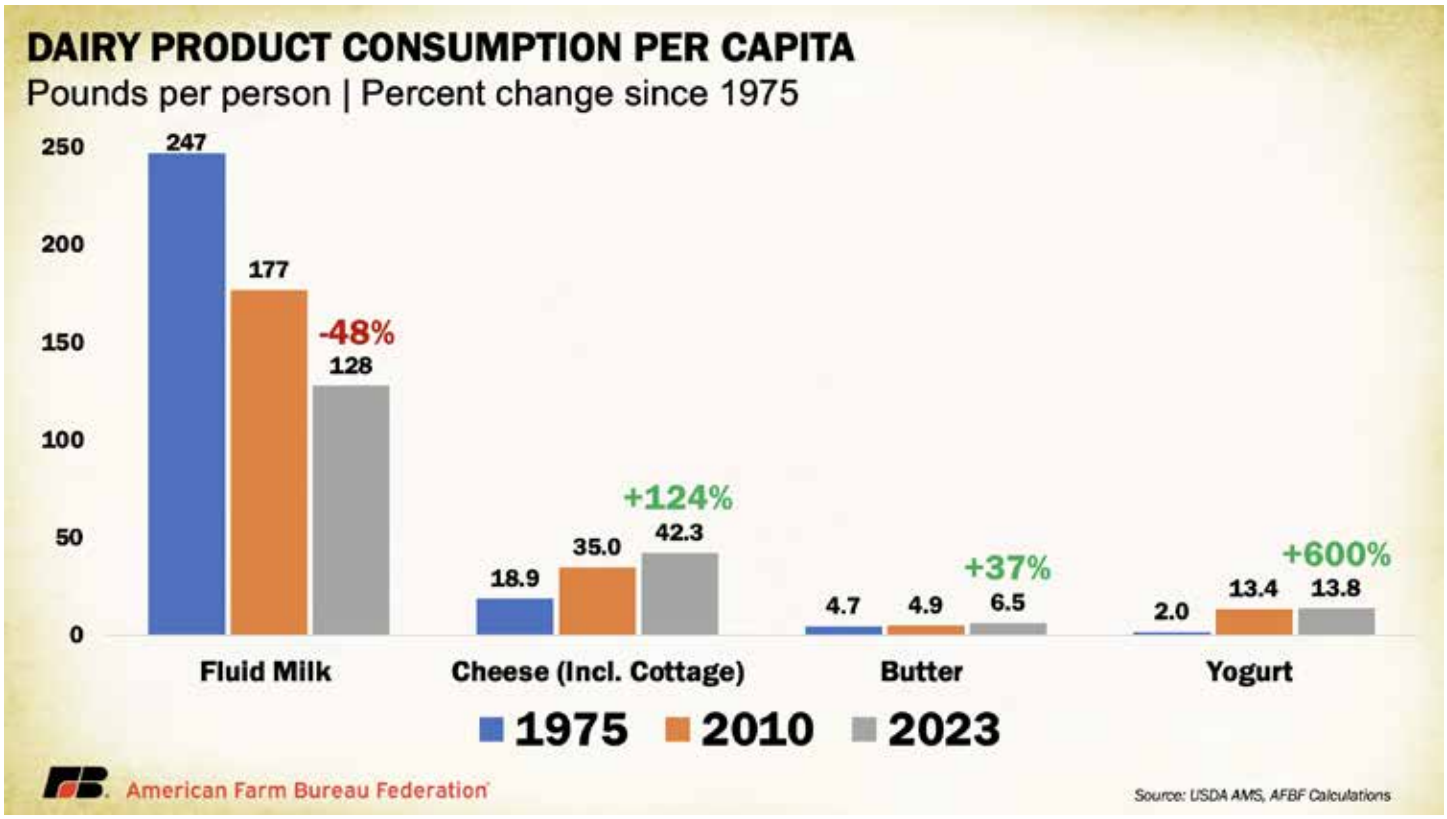
Whole milk stands out as a rare success story within the beverage category. Between 2013 and 2024, sales of whole and flavored whole milk grew by 16% (+2 billion pounds), while reduced-fat options lost ground: skim (–72%), 1% (–36%), 2% (–33%). Whole milk's share of total beverage sales rose from 27% to 38%.

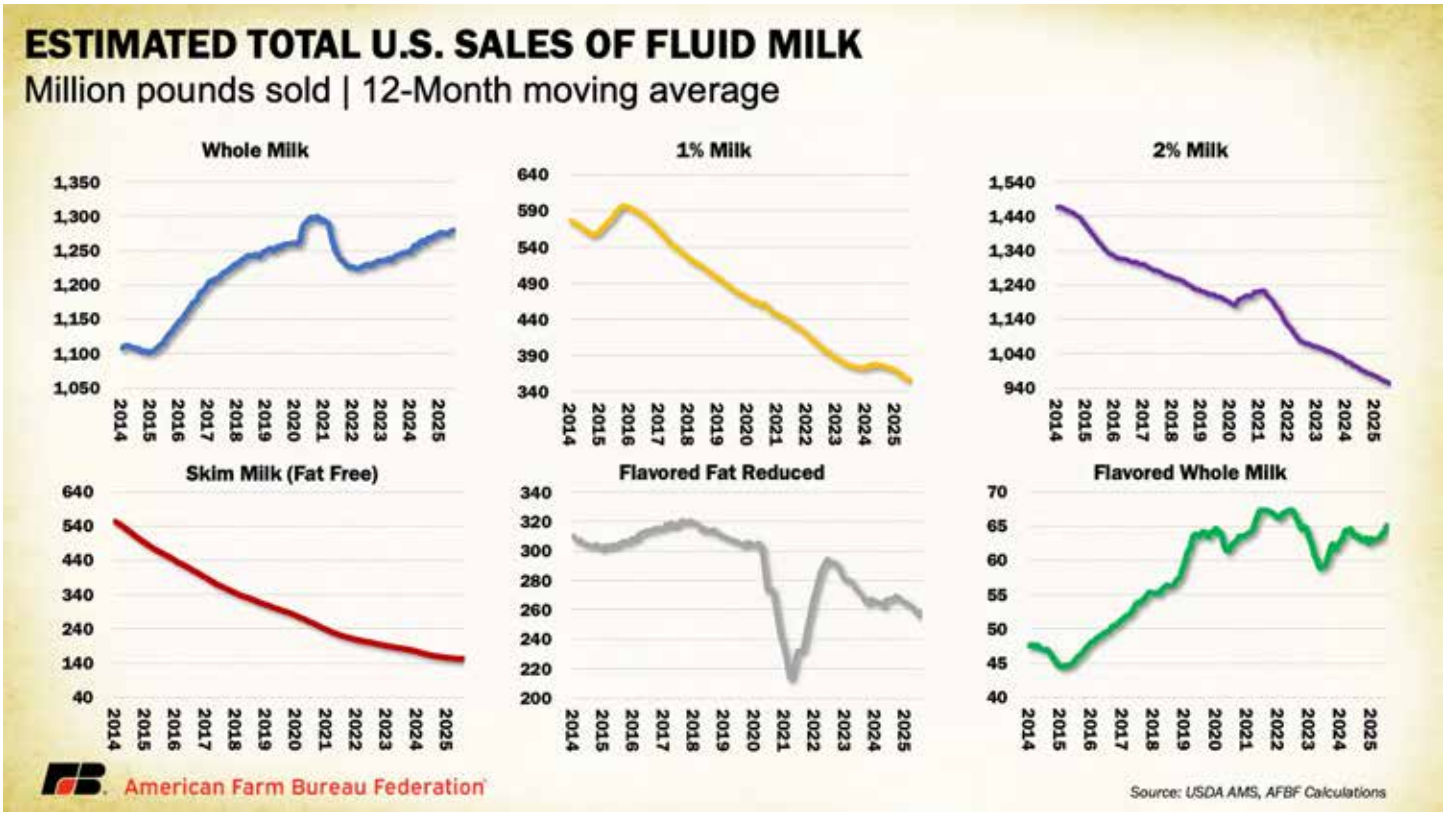
Some consumers have shifted from reduced-fat to whole milk options, driven by the "protein boom," renewed interest in minimally processed foods and perhaps, more recently, growing demand among users of GLP-1 medications (drugs such as Ozempic and Wegovy that suppress appetite) for fuller-fat, higher-protein options that promote satiety and sustained energy. Recent research indicates that about 38% of GLP-1 users report drinking more protein beverages, though it remains unclear whether this trend has specifically boosted whole milk consumption.

At the same time, complementary products like breakfast cereal have declined in popularity, eroding one of milk's strongest consumption anchors. Cereal and milk are natural complements; as more consumers opt for coffee, breakfast bars or yogurt cups on the go, both cereal and milk sales have suffered.

Policy history: how whole milk disappeared

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP), established in 1946, provides nutritious, low-cost meals to nearly 30 million





students each day. Because schools account for roughly 7.5% of U.S. fluid milk sales, NSLP nutrition rules have long influenced dairy demand.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 sought to improve school nutrition by capping sodium, calories and saturated fat. Beginning in the 2012–13 school year, USDA rules restricted milk served in schools to fat-free or 1% varieties. Whole and 2% milk were no longer allowed, and flavored milk had to be fat-free. Later updates permitted 1% flavored milk, but whole and 2% options have remained prohibited.

The rule coincided with a drop in student milk consumption. Between 2008 and 2018, weekly milk use per student fell from 4.03 to 3.39 cartons (–15%). Before 2012, consumption declined by 0.03 cartons per year; after the restriction, the rate accelerated to 0.13 cartons — a 77% faster decline. When students skip milk, both nutrition goals and dairy demand suffer. Those unopened cartons also create measurable food waste, raising costs for schools already operating on thin budgets.

The Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act

The bipartisan Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act introduced by Rep. Glenn "GT" Thompson, R-Pa., in the House and Sen. Roger Marshall, R-Kansas, in the Senate, would restore flexibility by allowing schools to serve whole, 2%, 1%, or skim milk (flavored or unflavored) as reimbursable meals.

It also clarifies that milkfat would not count toward the saturated-fat limit under school meal guidelines, ensuring compliance without penalizing higher-fat milk. The legislation includes a supply-chain requirement barring procurement from Chinese state-owned enterprises. As of October 2025, the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act has advanced out of both the House Education and Workforce Committee and the Senate Agriculture Committee by voice vote, but has yet to be considered by the full House or Senate for final passage.

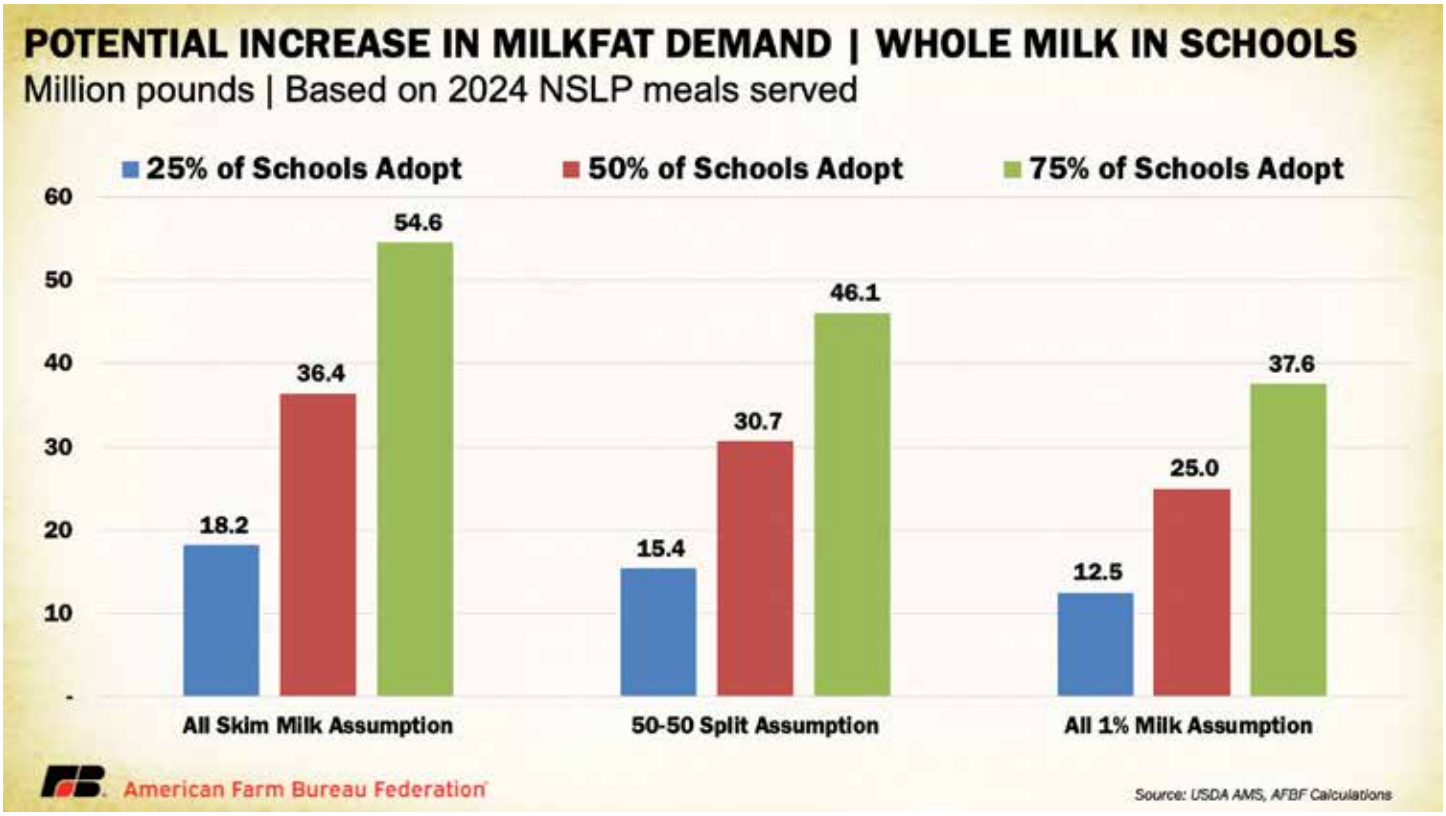
Notably, the act does not mandate that schools switch to whole milk; instead, it permits them to do so. This distinction is central to how the market could react. Because adoption would likely occur gradually, driven by local preference, supplier capacity and budget realities, the resulting increase in milkfat demand would build over time rather than appear all at once.

Potential market impacts

Restoring whole milk to school menus would not mandate a universal switch, but even moderate adoption could reshape component demand across the dairy sector. The National School Lunch Program served 4.86 billion meals in 2024, with roughly 85% of students selecting milk — about 4.13 billion half-pint cartons of skim or 1% milk.

Each carton of whole milk contains about 8 grams of fat, compared to 2.5 grams in 1% milk and virtually none in skim. This difference means that if schools begin offering whole milk again, every serving would draw an additional 5.5 to 8 grams of butterfat into the fluid stream that currently gets separated for butter, cheese or milk powder.

Under an all-skim baseline, if 25% of schools adopt whole milk (representing an early, conservative estimate), total milkfat utilization would rise by roughly 18 million pounds annually. If half of all schools make the switch, the increase grows to about



36 million pounds, and if three-quarters of schools adopt whole milk, the added fat demand reaches 55 million pounds per year.

Assuming current milk offerings are evenly split between skim and 1%, the same adoption levels would boost butterfat demand by 15 million, 31 million and 46 million pounds, respectively. Even under the more conservative all-1% baseline, increased milkfat demand would total 13 million, 25 million and 38 million pounds across the three adoption tiers, respectively.

At the high end, a near-universal shift to whole milk could divert the equivalent of 45 million to 66 million pounds of finished butter into fluid use each year, based on the Federal Milk Marketing Order yield assumption that 1 pound of butterfat produces about 1.21 pounds of butter. That amounts to roughly 2-3% of total U.S. butter production, a significant reallocation of components from manufactured to beverage markets.

This shift would come at a time when U.S. dairy farmers have already answered the call for more butterfat (boosting average butterfat levels more than 13% over the past decade) and would help capture greater value from that production in a market that often struggles to absorb the surplus fat.

In practical terms, this means the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act could modestly tighten butter and cream supplies while lifting Class I utilization and overall blend prices.

Between January and July of this year, Class I (fluid) milk accounted for about 25% of total U.S. milk use (23 billion of 92 billion pounds). Increasing school milk sales and milkfat utilization would strengthen this category, which carries the highest regulated value under the recently amended Federal Milk Marketing Orders.

Those changes, which restored the higher-of Class I mover and raised Class I differentials, already improved returns on milk sold into fluid channels. By pulling more butterfat into Class I use, schools could amplify the benefit of those reforms, helping to raise the uniform price farmers receive.

Even marginal increases in fluid demand can matter in an industry often oversupplied by just a few percentage points. Redirecting cream to bottled milk reduces low-value skim powder output, while higher butterfat utilization supports the value of components across all classes.

For processors, whole milk simplifies production and reduces drying and storage costs. For smaller dairies, particularly those without separators, the ability to bottle and sell whole milk locally could open new farm-to-school opportunities.

Conclusion

While the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act would represent only a modest change in total milk use, it targets one of the few demand streams that can grow in the currently saturated market. Even small shifts in school milk sales can strengthen the Class I category, lift butterfat utilization and return more value to farmers.

With 2025 milk production tracking at record highs and U.S. butterfat output already at historic levels, expanding whole milk options in schools would help absorb supply where it matters most — connecting students to the benefits and taste of milk and farmers to stronger milk checks. ■

Idaho animal health lab joins elite network

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

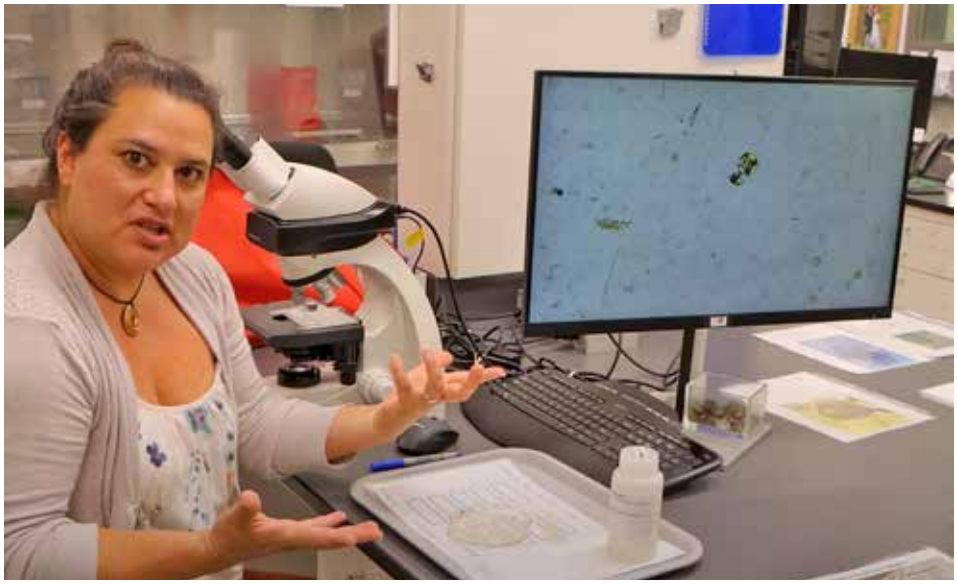


Photo by Sean Ellis

During a tour of the Idaho State Department of Agriculture's Animal Health Laboratory, Michelle Jakaitis, a bacteriologist and parasitologist, explains how lab technicians are trained to identify quagga mussels.

BOISE – Idaho's ability to do animal disease diagnostics has reached a new level.

The Idaho State Department of Agriculture in July announced its Animal Health Laboratory has been accepted as a member of the National Animal Health Laboratory Network (NAHLN).

This makes it the first lab in the state to earn this designation.

According to an ISDA news release, NAHLN is a nationally coordinated system of 60 federal, state and university-affiliated laboratories that conduct early detection testing, enabling rapid response and aiding recovery from high-consequence animal diseases.

ISDA Director Chanel Tewalt said NAHLN laboratories are essential for disease surveillance, outbreak response and protecting the nation's food supply and public health, and being a part of the network is a major step forward for Idaho.

The NAHLN recognition is an advancement in Idaho's animal disease diagnostic capabilities, she said.

"This designation means faster answers for producers, efficient responses to disease outbreaks, and a stronger, more secure future for our agricultural industry backed by in-state expertise," Tewalt stated in the news release.

Because it's NAHLN-certified, the Idaho lab is now authorized to conduct avian influenza testing on milk samples collected in Idaho. Those samples previously had to be sent out of state.

According to the news release, ISDA plans to expand its NAHLN-authorized testing to include additional high-consequence animal diseases in the coming months. As a NAHLN member, the laboratory is also eligible for increased federal funding to support operations and further development.

ISDA's Animal Health Laboratory supports livestock producers, veterinarians, the Idaho Departments of Fish and Game and Health and Welfare, USDA, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services.

The new certification will benefit Idaho producers because of the rapid results they will receive, Dan Salmi, ISDA's laboratory bureau chief, told Idaho Farm Bureau Federation during a tour of the lab.

"If there was an animal disease outbreak and they need rapid diagnostics services performed on their animals, instead of them coming to us and we have to figure out a location somewhere else in the country to send these samples, our state veterinarian can just drop that sample off over in our lab and maybe that same day they'll have the answer," he said.

The lab this spring started doing some of its own testing for quagga mussels. Previously, those test samples were sent to Florida.

"It's much more efficient and timely doing all this testing in-state," Salmi said.

ISDA opened a new, state-of-the-art animal and plant health lab in 2022 that is much larger and more modern than the previous lab. At the time, ISDA officials said the new lab would enable the department to greatly expand its testing capacity if necessary.

Salmi said NAHLN certification is something ISDA has sought for about a decade but wasn't possible with the previous facility, which didn't have the proper safety infrastructure in place.

When the new facility opened, "it allowed us to get more serious about pursuing NAHLN certification," he said.

Compared to the old lab, the new one "has been such a big leap forward," said Dr. Scott Leibsle, the state veterinarian.

In particular, it has allowed for more rapid testing results, he said. "We can get answers to producers quicker ... I can't tell you how valuable that is."

For example, he said, the lab tests about 32,000 trichomoniasis (trich) samples annually for Idaho livestock producers. The new lab, and trich testing infrastructure, has resulted in a savings for producers and veterinarians of about $10 per head of cattle per trich test.

When it comes to trich testing, "Our productivity has skyrocketed," Leibsle said. "This is an increased advantage we can offer back to cattle producers in Idaho."

During the recent lab tour, Michelle Jakaitis, a bacteriologist and parasitologist, told Farm Bureau, "We're incredibly grateful for this building. It's a huge upgrade." ■

Ag department awards $1.6 million in grants

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Thirteen projects that propose to benefit Idaho's agricultural industry have received a total of $1.6 million in grant money this year from the state's ag department.

The money was awarded through the Idaho State Department of Agriculture's specialty crop block grant program, which receives annual funding through the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The grant money is used to promote, market and conduct research for the state's specialty crops, which include vegetables, fruits, tree nuts, dried fruits, nursery and horticulture crops.

Since it was created in 2009, the Idaho specialty crop block grant program has awarded 227 projects a total of almost $24 million.

The funding has proved especially beneficial to some of the state's smaller specialty crop sectors, including to Idaho's 500 dry bean growers.

The Idaho Bean Commission has received several grants over the years that have helped fund important research projects, said IBC Executive Director Andi Woolf-Weibye.

These grants have helped supplement the IBC's limited budget and enabled the commission to fund important research projects that benefit bean growers, she said. Without the grants, these projects may not have been feasible, she added.

"With the funding of these projects, these grants have helped catapult us to lead industry challenges," Woolf-Weibye said. "It's really important for us to keep ahead of these things. As a commission, it's our job, our charge, to keep in front of any potential industry-changing challenges."

This year, the bean commission received an $80,000 grant to help fund a University of Idaho project that seeks ways to rapidly and accurately detect a bacterial pathogen in beans.

Woolf-Weibye said this pathogen can cause high yield loss in bean crops if not detected, and it is a quarantine organism in the European Union.

Idaho is a national and global leader in the export of dry bean seed and she said it's important that the state's bean industry stays on top of this issue and prevents the pathogen from becoming a problem in Idaho.

"It's a bad disease for beans and we don't want it here in Idaho," she said.

The Idaho Wine Commission received a $125,000 grant for a project that seeks to elevate the visibility and reputation of Idaho wine and cider.

In Idaho, there are more than 70 vineyards with a combined 1,400 acres, 64 wineries and eight cideries.

According to the grant proposal, "This project will reinforce consumer awareness and pride in Idaho's growing wine and cider industry, highlighting the craftsmanship and agricultural excellence of local producers."

Julianne Germain, the wine commission's grant manager, said the specialty crop block grant program "has played a vital role in our ambition to become the best wine growing region in the Pacific Northwest."

"Major marketing projects have been funded by these grants, which have allowed us to put the Idaho wine industry on the map both nationally and internationally," she said.

Germain said the commission has also been awarded grants which have allowed it the opportunity to bring high-level experts to Idaho to provide educational seminars to industry members at no cost to them.

She said the main focus of this year's grant "will be showcasing Idaho made wine for an Idaho made lifestyle."

The Sunnyslope Wine Trail, a group of 20 wineries in the Sunnyslope wine region of southwestern Idaho, received a $100,000 grant to promote its new American Viticultural Area designation.

According to the grant proposal, the marketing effort aims to increase wine sales by at least $51,000, and result in more than 190,000 visits to Sunny Slope wineries.

"Expected outcomes include increased sales, increased consumer knowledge of the Sunnyslope wine region, and increased consumption of Idaho specialty crops," the proposal states.

The Idaho Hop Commission received a $50,000 grant to build awareness of Idaho hops through trade shows, reverse trade missions and social media.

According to the grant proposal, the project "will include industry members attending domestic and international trade shows to learn from brewers and dealers. It will also include bringing international buyers to Idaho for them to learn firsthand the growing practices for Idaho hops."

U.S. and Idaho hop acres have declined dramatically the past few years, following more than a decade of rapid growth that saw Idaho pass Oregon as the No. 2 hop state. This year, Oregon regained the No. 2 spot from Idaho for total hop acres.

"With the reduction in the number of hop acreage that has taken place over the past couple of years, it is important to stay in touch with the brewers and dealers," the grant proposal states.

A $100,000 grant was awarded to the Idaho Oilseed Commission for a project aimed at optimizing nutrient and water use efficiency for Idaho's culinary mustard varieties.

The commission will work with U of I scientists to research agronomic management practices of irrigated yellow and oriental culinary mustard grown for spice.

The grant proposal states that the "results from this project will provide stakeholders with foundational knowledge about nutrient and water management, allowing their farming operations to remain economically and environmentally viable."

The Idaho Potato Commission received a $125,000 grant to enhance exports of Idaho potato products to Mexico.

According to the grant proposal, "The objective of the project will be to enhance distributor relationships and partnerships to ultimately increase consumption of Idaho potatoes, in all forms, throughout Mexico … This will be achieved through display building, sampling events, and trade show participation to increase awareness of Idaho potatoes."

A $250,000 grant was awarded to the ISDA's Division of Agricultural Inspections to modernize Idaho's potato grading systems.

The grant proposal says updated technologies, such as high-resolution imaging, machine vision and artificial intelligence, will be used to increase grading accuracy, reduce labor inputs "and better align with quality specifications across markets."

"This will result in objective, more consistent results, which will create more certainty for the processors and the growers," the proposal states.

Idaho Preferred, an ISDA program, received a $291,000 grant to promote Idaho specialty crops. This will be accomplished through strategic retail partnerships, wholesaler education, agritourism marketing, and digital asset development.

"This initiative will enhance specialty crop visibility, streamline sourcing for consumers and businesses, and increase direct and retail sales through targeted advertising, producer storytelling, and in-store merchandising," the grant proposal states.

Key activities in this proposal include a statewide consumer awareness campaign, in-store promotions, a harvest media and retailer tour, producer education workshops, expanded agritourism marketing, and the development of the Idaho Preferred Magazine.

"The expected outcome is a 5% increase in specialty crop sales, reaching approximately $98.2 million, reflecting continued growth and expanded market opportunities for Idaho growers," the grant proposal states.

The Mid Snake Resource Conservation and Development Council received a $60,000 grant to reduce the population of codling moths and mitigate their economic damage to apple and pear trees in southcentral Idaho.

The project proposes to locate orchards throughout the valley, monitor the presence of codling moths and then release sterile male moths into infected orchards, thereby reducing the moth's population and economic impact.

"Targeting the entire valley instead of individual orchards should result in greater reduction and decrease the occurrence of re-infestation as compared to targeting individual orchards," the grant proposal states.

ISDA awarded Oregon State University a $150,000 grant to assess food safety risks in bulb onions, which are grown on a large scale in eastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho.

OSU researchers will explore the behavior of foodborne pathogens in damaged and diseased onion bulbs and how that could influence food safety risks throughout the dry bulb onion supply chain.

"Greenhouse and laboratory results will be used to inform a quantitative microbial risk assessment model … to support industry decision-making related to disease management and sanitation practices in storage and packing houses," the grant proposal states.

A $16,000 grant was awarded to Sundries Farm to introduce and propagate new garlic varieties in Idaho.

The farm, which is located in the Hagerman area, will work with ISDA to develop six new varieties of garlic.

University of Idaho was awarded a $120,000 grant to develop effective methods to manage powdery scab and potato mop-top viruses. This will be done through field trials at the university's Aberdeen and Parma research and Extension centers.

These trials will assess irrigation management, variety resistance, and disease control.

According to the grant proposal, "The project aims to identify effective biopesticides and fungicides to reduce yield losses, enhance tuber quality, and address export challenges…."

U of I received a $130,000 grant to develop novel fungicides for potato production and evaluate the efficacy of newly identified compounds against potato pathogens.

Idaho ranks No. 1 in the nation in potato production and the state's spud crop results in billions of dollars of economic activity in the state each year.

According to the grant proposal, "The long-term goal of our multi-disciplinary University of Idaho team is to increase the sustainability of potato production, a foundational component of Idaho agriculture."

The proposal says the U of I team has developed a novel pipeline for discovering fungicides with new modes of action.

"While traditional methods rely on large screens of similar compounds, our pipeline uses a combination of bioinformatics, molecular modeling simulations and lab, greenhouse and field experiments to discover compounds that bind to novel protein targets and stop fungal growth," the proposal states. ■

IFBF photos

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation's Moving Agriculture to the Classroom trailer takes ag education on the road.

Idaho Farm Bureau takes agricultural education on the road

By Quentin Slater
AFBF Communications Assistant

To engage with younger audiences about the world of agriculture and get members involved in promoting agriculture in a fun, interactive way, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation started its Moving Agriculture to the Classroom (MAC) Trailer program.

The program started with a single trailer and two modules but has now expanded to three trailers and four modules. Each of the modules is also paired with a specific "Big Book," teaching school-aged children about different agricultural commodities. The original goal set by Idaho Farm Bureau was to schedule the trailer to visit 20-30 schools every year. However, this goal has been far exceeded, with the MAC trailers visiting more than 75 schools every year and presenting to over 11,000 students.

Additionally, the trailers now visit 12 county fairs and the state fair to reach another 25,000-plus children.

The program has also proven to be a great retention tool for students who go on to be involved in agriculture. Many students who experienced the trailer when they were younger come back to teach one of the modules when they are older.

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation, teachers and students alike say they have been pleased with how the program has evolved through the years. This has also provided a great way for Farm Bureau members to have a meaningful experience in their local communities. ■

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation's Moving Agriculture to the Classroom trailer presents to more than 11,000 students each year.

Country Chuckles

By Jonny Hawkins

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FOREST STRONG

Care for your Douglas firs, protect your land

By Randy Brooks
University of Idaho

Douglas fir is one of the most important tree species in Idaho. It covers about six to seven million acres and shapes the character of the state's mountains and river valleys.

Many wildlife species depend on it, including elk, mule deer, woodpeckers, owls, and squirrels that use its seeds, branches, and tree cavities. Douglas fir is also a major timber source that supports mills, contractors, and rural communities.

At the same time, these forests protect watersheds, hold soil on steep slopes, and help store snowpack that provides water for farms and towns. Because Douglas fir is so widespread and valuable, anything that affects its health can impact the entire landscape. This makes the current Douglas fir bark beetle outbreak more than a small issue—it affects wildlife habitat, timber value, and the long-term resilience of Idaho's forests.

Recent aerial surveys and forest health reports show that beetle activity has increased across many regions. In 2024, about 30,000 acres of Douglas fir were killed by the beetle. Most of these trees were already weakened by drought, old fire damage, insect defoliation, or overcrowded growing conditions.

While this number is still a small percentage of Idaho's total Douglas fir forest, the outbreak is large enough that private landowners near impacted areas should pay attention. Beetles can build up quickly when there are plenty of downed or damaged trees, especially after windstorms

ABOVE: **Recently blown-down trees from wind events are very susceptible to Douglas fir beetle attacks.** LEFT: **Douglas fir bark beetles make a distinct gallery that has a j hook shape at the bottom.** Photos by Tom Eckberg

or wildfires. Once beetle populations grow, they can begin to attack healthy trees that normally resist them.

Being able to spot early signs of attack is one of the best tools landowners have. A tree's crown may start to fade from green to yellow and then reddish-brown. Small blobs of resin can appear on the trunk where beetles try to bore in. Fine sawdust may collect at the base of the tree.

Under the bark, beetles create S-shaped tunnels through the living tissue. In later stages, decay fungi may grow on the bark surface, showing the beetles have fully occupied the tree.

Understanding the beetle's life cycle can help landowners decide when to take action. In Idaho, Douglas fir beetles usually produce one generation per year. Adults spend winter under the bark and begin flying in spring once temperatures rise. Females tunnel into the phloem, lay eggs, and larvae feed through summer.

New adults develop by late summer or fall. Some fly, while others stay in the tree until the next spring. Because the beetle's most vulnerable stages occur before and during spring flight, treatments such as sanitation harvesting and placing MCH pheromone packets work best when done before beetles start flying.

Trees become vulnerable when they are stressed. Drought, root damage, crowding, or fire scorch all make it harder for trees to defend themselves. Large, older Douglas fir growing close together tend to be the most at risk because their thick bark gives beetles ideal tunneling habitat. Outbreaks often occur after windthrow or other events that create lots of fresh downed material.

Management works best when landowners use several tools together. Thinning overcrowded stands is one of the most important long-term strategies. When trees have more space, they get better sunlight, water, and nutrients. This increases their growth and strengthens natural defenses.

MCH pheromone packets can be effective for protecting individual trees. Above is a MCH bubble cap on a Douglas fir.

Thinning can occur in many seasons, but the safest time is late summer through mid-winter, when beetles are not flying and fresh slash is less attractive. Many foresters recommend finishing thinning by February or early March so the material dries before beetle flight.

If thinning must happen during spring or early summer, slash should be removed, chipped, or scattered so it does not attract beetles.

Sanitation harvesting (the removal of already infested trees) is very time-sensitive. These trees should be cut and removed before the next generation of beetles emerges, usually by late May or early June depending on elevation. Logs should be hauled away, debarked, burned, or processed so beetles cannot finish developing.

Another helpful method is using trap trees or baited logs. Selected trees are felled or baited in early spring to draw beetles into a predictable location. These trees must be removed or destroyed before adults emerge. This method works well on smaller properties when paired with good sanitation practices.

For small areas of high-value trees, MCH pheromone packets are a practical and non-toxic option. When hung in early spring, these packets release a chemical signal that imitates a fully attacked tree.

This tells incoming beetles that the tree is already occupied and they should stay away. MCH works best for individual trees, home sites, or small stands rather than large acreage.

Landowners can buy MCH packets from forestry supply companies such as Forestry Distributing, Synergy Semiochemicals, and EcoGreen Warehouse. These suppliers sell the common formats used in Idaho, including bubble caps and extended-release strips.

Many landowners buy them through group orders organized by state forestry agencies or local conservation districts. MCH packets should be stored in a cool place, such as a refrigerator or freezer, until they are ready to be used in the field.

Chemical sprays containing carbaryl or pyrethroids can protect individual high-value trees as well, but they must be applied before beetles fly and require specialized application equipment. They are not practical for large stands.

After an outbreak ends, long-term recovery should focus on creating resilient forests with more species and age diversity. Mixing Douglas fir with western larch, ponderosa pine, and other species creates more resilient forests. Keeping stands well-spaced and reducing the number of large, older Douglas fir also helps prevent future outbreaks.

Take action early by being proactive. Thinning, sanitation, added species diversity, and well-timed treatments are the best way to protect Idaho's Douglas fir forests and keep them healthy for future generations.

Regular monitoring is important. Walking your land between June and September helps you spot fading crowns early and plan winter treatments. Idaho Department of Lands foresters, consulting foresters, and University of Idaho Extension professionals can provide guidance, help evaluate stands, and recommend management options. ■

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

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KBFIFBF

New tool helps farmers protect crops, cut costs

University of Idaho News Release

MOSCOW, Idaho – A new online tool from University of Idaho Extension is helping farmers across the state better protect crops, reduce unnecessary pesticide applications and save money by tracking how seasonal heat affects crop growth and pest development.

The Growing Degree Day Calculator, developed by Canyon County Extension educator Jemila Chellappa, uses daily temperature data to predict when key crops and insect pests reach critical growth stages. The calculator gives farmers science-based guidance on the best times to apply pesticides, irrigate or fertilize.

"For generations, farmers have turned to the calendar, but the calendar can't tell you what the weather has or hasn't done," Chellappa said. "We now have a user-friendly, real-time tool to help farmers, researchers and advisors across the Pacific Northwest track crop development and pest stages based on temperature, not just the calendar."

A growing degree day is a measurement of how hot it's been over a 24-hour period, comparing the mean temperature against a base value. The calculator is available on the Pacific Northwest Pest Alert Network website at pnwpestalert.net/gdd, operated by UI Extension, Idaho Master Gardeners, Oregon State University and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

The calculator draws localized data from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's AgriMet weather stations. Several Treasure Valley farmers are already using the beta version of the calculator.

Chellappa is working to incorporate the state's major crops into the calculator and has already added potatoes, sugar beets, alfalfa, barley and wheat. The software uses site-specific calculations to pinpoint the growth stages of key pests and diseases affecting those commodities.

By enabling farmers to eliminate unnecessary chemical applications, this calculator also protects beneficial insects or biocontrol agents that predate on pests.

Furthermore, farmers can use the calculator to track whether their crops are progressing on schedule and to identify likely causes if crop development falls behind where the calculator indicates it should be.

Chellappa is seeking funding and partners to continue expanding the calculator's capabilities. ■

"We now have a user-friendly, real-time tool to help farmers, researchers and advisors across the Pacific Northwest track crop development and pest stages based on temperature, not just the calendar."

– Jemila Chellappa, Canyon County Extension educator

ABOVE: **A new online tool promises to help farmers better protect their crops.** Photo by Amanda Darland; RIGHT: **Jemila Chellappa, Canyon County Extension educator developed the Growing Degree Day Calculator to give farmers science-based data to track crop development and pest stages.** Submitted photo

Predator mites are released from a cylinder attached to a drone. These mites prey on spider mites, a pest that can be detrimental to a farmer's crops. Submitted photos

Drones and beneficial insect release

By Paul Boehlke
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

HOMEDALE – Terravata is an Idaho-based company that uses drones for a variety of services.

One of the most unusual ways the company uses drones is to release beneficial insects to manage pests.

In this case, to combat spider mites that feed on corn and other crops by using predatory mites that feed on the spider mites, which can be a serious threat to crops.

"Yeah, they can get really nasty," Terravata owner Jake Pool says about the spider mites.

They're called a spider mite, he says, because when they start to increase their populations, they create spider-like webbing on leaves and then lay their eggs in them.

Pool says the pest mites, also known as the two-spotted spider mite, can multiple very quickly, going from an egg to an adult within a week. When they feed on corn, hops, mint, sugar beets and other crops, they can have serious effects on yields.

"They can be really tricky to kill," Pool says. "They're so small they're hard to see with the naked eye."

The predatory mites are natural predators to the spider mites and can be dropped from the drones like tiny paratroopers onto fields. A mite with a parachute is actually the logo of Parabug, the California company that Terravata has partnered with.

"A lot of these species are native to our area, so we're not introducing a non-native species. And if they don't have a food source, they're just not going to generate anymore and they'll eventually die off."

– Jake Pool, Terravata owner

Pool says in the past crews would have to walk through fields with small bottles and release the beneficial mites by hand.

"It was a very cumbersome and time-consuming process," he says.

Pool says that with drones they can map out a field and cover about 10 acres per load, landing only to change batteries and re-load more mites into the spinning cylinders they're released from. He says they can cover from two to 300 acres per drone in a day.

Terravata ownerJake Pool shows a farmer a Mite container.

Terravata works with a number of insectaries in the county to get the predatory mites.

Insectaries are facilities that rear beneficial insects that are used for biological pest control in agriculture.

The insects are shipped in cold packs in a carrier material that gives them a temporary habitat during transit. Most come from insectaries here in the United States, but some are from as far away as Israel.

He says there's probably always going to be a need for pesticide usage, but a lot of times the spider mites develop a resistance to miticides.

"I look at the beneficial insect release as just another tool in your tool belt," he said.

Pool says his company tries to make the spraying of the beneficial insects affordable and comparable to the same cost of a miticide that would be applied.

Pool and his one other employee do applications in Idaho in the summer and in the winter in California on strawberry fields.

They also do nighttime applications when it's too hot and release other kinds of predatory insects for a variety of pests.

"A lot of people still don't know about it, so I … enjoy educating the general public, whether it's farmers or not," Pool says.

He says he also enjoys being able to open a container and show the growers what these predatory mites or other beneficial insects they're releasing look like and getting the drone up in the air to show them the camera view, as well as all the capabilities and technology that's built into the drones.

A common question Pool gets asked about releasing insects is what the beneficial insects do when they run out of a food source.

"A lot of these species are native to our area, so we're not introducing a non-native species," he says. "And if they don't have a food source, they're just not going to generate anymore and they'll eventually die off." ■

LEFT: **A closeup of a drone carrying cylinders of beneficial insects.**

New entomologist seeking options for specialty crop farmers

By John O'Connell
University of Idaho

Photos courtesy of Marcelo Dimase

Marcelo Dimase is the new assistant professor of entomology and Extension specialist, based at the University of Idaho's Parma Research and Extension Center.

PARMA – The mint stem borer has emerged as a threatening pest of Canyon County mint production, and with no insecticides registered to protect the crop, the region's farmers lack tools to combat it.

Fortunately, University of Idaho's new Extension pesticide specialist, Marcelo Dimase, has prioritized finding an effective insecticide option for mint. Upon identifying a promising product, Dimase will pursue a special local needs exemption, which would grant the area's mint farmers special permission to use a product approved only for other crops.

Dimase, an assistant professor of entomology who joined the university in early August 2025, is based at U of I's Parma Research and Extension Center, where he leads pesticide safety and education programs and is the state liaison for Idaho's IR-4 Project. Funded with a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, the IR-4 Project provides research and testing in support of new pesticide registrations for specialty crops, which may have too few acres in production to entice investment by large chemical companies.

"The problem these specialty crop growers face is they don't have as many tools as growers of larger crops such as … corn," Dimase said. "The industry doesn't necessarily test pesticides on small crops, because it knows it is not going to sell many products to mint growers."

Since the state's IR-4 Project started in 1963, the program has resulted in more than 200 new products becoming available to producers of crops such as peas, beans, oilseeds, onions, tree fruit, mint and grasses.

Dimase works closely with Will Meeks, minor use pesticide specialist at U of I, who is based at the Twin Falls Research and Extension Center.

Through IR-4, U of I conducts 10 to 15 trials per year — about two-thirds of which take place in the Magic Valley and a third of which are done in the Parma area — and tests the efficacy and residue of various fungicides, herbicides and insecticides on a host of specialty crops.

The tests support special-needs exemptions to protect designated specialty crops.

Dimase hypothesizes that Plinazolin, a broad-spectrum insecticide manufactured by Syngenta for several major crops, will also be effective against mint stem borer. Plinazolin has not been registered for any U.S. crops yet, but Syngenta expects to release it within the next one or two years.

To expedite reviewing the chemical, Dimase intends to perform trials in commercial fields in the Parma area in cooperation with growers who have had problems with mint stem borer.

He also plans to evaluate how applying Plinazolin on mint crops may adversely affect beneficial insects, such as bees.

Upon finding a viable option for mint farmers, Dimase hopes to obtain IR-4 funding to conduct residue testing, which would be the next step in the approval process.

Another priority project for Dimase will be to research the species composition of Idaho thrips, which are tiny, winged insects that suck plant sap and can cause significant damage to ornamental and food crops. For example, thrips can reduce onion yields by up to 20%, and different species may exhibit differences in insecticide resistance, as well as the window during which insecticide treatments against them are most effective.

Onion thrips can also spread iris yellow spot virus, which can cause severe economic problems in onions.

"If you look at the acreage of onions in our area of Canyon County, it has been reduced significantly due to falling onion prices and for pest-management reasons such as increasing pressure from onion thrips and iris yellow spot virus, as well," Dimase said.

Dimase was born and raised in Brazil, where he studied agricultural engineering as an undergraduate at University of Sao Paulo. He became interested in a career in agriculture based on his experience helping at his grandparents' small farm, where they raised avocados, mangos, corn, beans, herbs and other crops, mostly for their own consumption.

Seeking to improve his English, he worked for about a year at a couple of farms in Australia, where he drove tractors and fed pigs and sheep.

Dimase went on to earn a master's degree from Louisiana State University and a doctorate from the University of Florida, both in entomology, before accepting a position as a postdoctoral researcher at Cornell University.

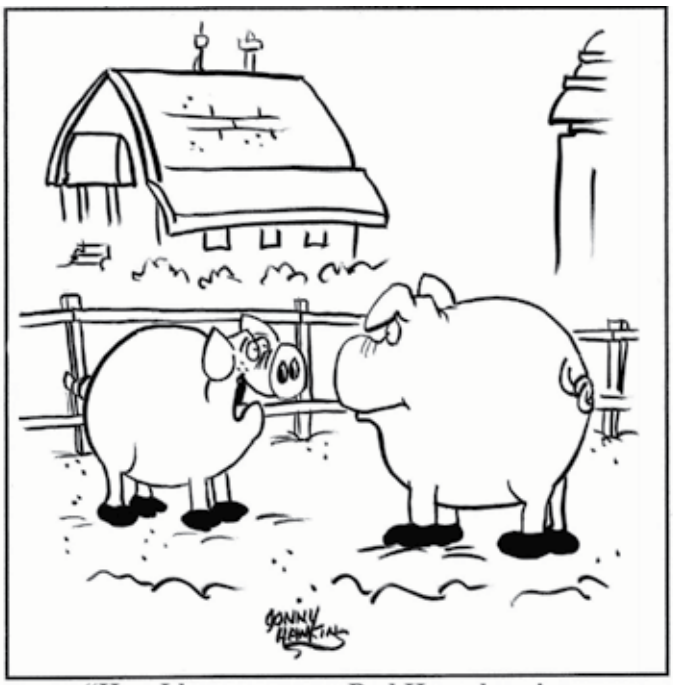
His master's thesis entailed studying behaviors of Lepidopteran pests — the family of butterflies and moths — of corn, and his doctoral dissertation targeted whiteflies in vegetable crops such as tomatoes, zucchini and eggplant.

He said he chose to work for U of I over other options based on the flexibility of the job requirements and his admiration of the Vandal faculty he met while interviewing. ■

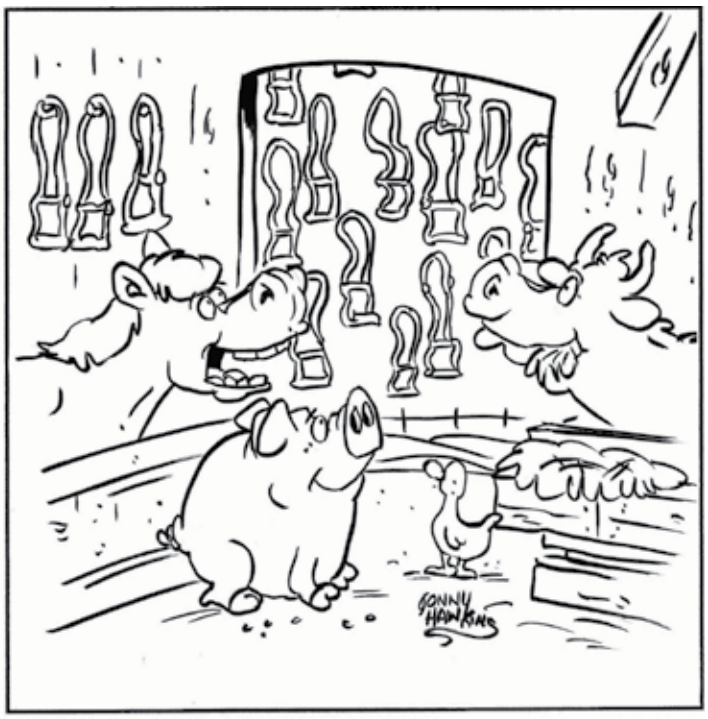
Marcelo Dimase works in a growth chamber where plants are exposed to insect-vectored pathogens.

Country Chuckles

By Jonny Hawkins



"Hey, I hear you won Bad Housekeeping Squeal of Approval?!"



"Oh, look - it's a bridle shower!"

Donated livestock provides protein for food pantries and schools

By Paige Nelson
For Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

What food staples are food pantries most desperate for? Hint: it isn't ramen noodles. Meat and dairy products top the list.

It's pretty hard to create a nutritious meal from canned and shelf-stable boxed foods alone, which are the most frequently donated items to food pantries.

However, if you've ever tried to donate fresh-from-the-farm beef to a local food pantry, you quickly see why canned food drives are popular — they are easy.

Donating beef to food pantries and school meal programs isn't easy. But that didn't stop Matt Pierson from turning his good idea into a working model with aspirations of recreating it anywhere in the country.

Pierson is a cattle rancher located just outside of Livingston, Mont. He manages an Angus-based cow herd using Hereford bulls to create high-end F1-cross replacement heifers. While cattle ranching is his day job, people are his passion and he has immersed himself in his community's needs.

"When COVID hit, it was very clear what was happening to the families that we had in our area," says Pierson of the immediate struggles he witnessed.

Although he was in the middle of calving season, arguably the busiest time of the year for a rancher, he couldn't sit still and watch everything around him shut down.

He decided to process some older cows and donate the beef to the Livingston Food Resource Center. While he was at it, he thought maybe some neighbors would want to join him.

"We called a bunch of the neighbors and rounded up some cows and got the first 800 pounds (lbs.) shipped out the door within about five days," he recalls.

ABOVE: **Cow-calf rancher Matt Pierson is the creator of the Producer Partnership and, with his team, is seeing the excitement for the program spread across the state.** RIGHT: **Meat processed by the Producer Partnership is shipped throughout the state of Montana through the food bank network.** Submitted photos

That's when the floodgates opened. The Producer Partnership was born.

"A lot of people heard what we were doing. They just started dropping off animals," he says. "The Park County Community Foundation heard what we were doing, and they offered $3,500 to start helping pay for the processing. That number grew to about $12,000 within six days."

Suddenly, Pierson found himself simultaneously running a ranch and a charity during a pandemic.

"We had about 10 days of free rein," he says. "We got animals from everywhere, got them into local butchers, and got a bunch of work done." So much so that the director of the local food pantry called to say he was out of storage space for frozen beef and was going to ship it to other pantries in the region.

Then, the food supply chain issues hit everyone, from the packing plants to the grocery stores. Custom beef processing came to a screeching halt.

Cattle were still being donated, but no meat cutters were taking them. Pierson found himself feeding cull cows with nowhere to go with them.

"I was calling everybody within a five-state region of us," he explains.

Finally, Yellowstone River Beef in Williston, N.D., agreed to take the cattle. It was an eight-hour drive one way, but Pierson did it and did it often. In the first year of the Producer Partnership program, 25,000 pounds of ground beef was donated to the Montana Food Bank Network.

After five years of operation, the non-profit, live-animal donation program has grown immensely. It has positioned itself as the only USDA federally inspected, nonprofit-owned and operated meat processing facility in the United States.

It earned that distinction when, in February 2021, the board of directors unanimously voted to build their own facility.

"I get to see all of this and realize that the quality of people that do what we do every day are amazing. There is no comparison."

– Matt Pierson, rancher/founder, The Producer Partnership

"I had a whole bunch of cows here waiting to get shipped out," explains Pierson, who still hauling them to North Dakota at the time. "I had to put one of them down because her health had just really, really gone downhill. I was really frustrated, so I called the board and I said, 'Ok, that's it. We're opening our own facility.'"

They applied for federal inspection almost immediately and everything from fundraising for the facility and receiving inspection licenses fell into place.

By June 2022, the processing facility, built on Pierson's home ranch, was operating and accepting everything from cattle to goats to bison. Today they can ship USDA-inspected ground meat in 1-lb. packages to food banks throughout the region. They make customized orders for school lunch programs, and they host federal meat inspector trainings.

"We facilitate either the pickup or the drop off of an animal, the processing, getting a tax letter back to the producer, and sort of everything in between under the federal inspection guidelines," Pierson explains.

Currently, the Partnership processes the equivalent of four cows per day, intending to increase to 12 per day as they find the staff to grow.

That's because Pierson and his board of directors aren't seeing any slowdown in the supply of animals, even during record-high cull cow prices. He attributes that to the type of people he works with through this program.

"A lot of people want to help out their local communities," he says. "We're able to help draw such a more direct line from a producer to their own community, meaning that they can ship us an animal, and they get that animal back to whatever local nonprofit that they want to try to help … I get to see all of this and realize that the quality of people that do what we do every day are amazing. There is no comparison."

For questions about how to donate or how to start a program in your area, contact Pierson at (406) 220.7223 or by email at highlandlivestock@gmail.com. ■

The Producer Partnership processing center is located next to Matt Pierson's ranch headquarters and was donated by the Pierson ranch.

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LOOKING FOR A NEW PODCAST?

DIRT ROAD DISCUSSIONS

Episode 94: Dams Of The Pacific Northwest

Adam Ratliff, known as the Armchair Engineer, knows that when the topic of dams in the Pacific Northwest comes up, people start talking. Whether it is the topic of salmon recovery and breaching or the need for hydroelectric power and agriculture, Adam has studied how both good information and misinformation have spread, making it hard for many to understand.

Adam discusses a host of variables surrounding small private and larger federally run dams, which creates the debate. He also shares how the history of dams and fish in the Pacific Northwest has gotten us to where we are today.