GEM STATE Producer
Idaho Farm Bureau
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SPUD FARMERS
Face Challenges

The Zipline

By Zippy Duvall
President, American Farm Bureau Federation

Growing demand for American grown agriculture

On my family farm in Georgia, every season begins with the same basic question: will the numbers work?

Like farmers across the country, my family looks at the cost of seed, fertilizer, feed, fuel, and labor before we plant a crop or expand the herd. Farming has never been easy, but lately, it's been harder to make those numbers work.

I recently had the opportunity to testify before the Senate Agriculture Committee about the challenges farmers and ranchers are facing and what it will take to keep American agriculture strong in the years ahead.

As I shared with lawmakers, the story of today's farm economy is one of incredible productivity paired with increasingly tight margins.

Farmers today are producing more than ever. Innovation and technology have helped us grow more food, fiber, and fuel using fewer resources than ever before. But productivity alone does not pay the bills.

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The President's Desk

By Matt Dorsey
President, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

We must keep telling ag's story

During the annual Larry Branen Ag Summit, a handful of farmers or ranchers are recognized for their significant and life-long contributions to Idaho agriculture.

During this year's summit in February, Gov. Brad Little, himself a rancher and farmer, made an important point.

He said the men and women involved in agriculture know the people who receive the awards and what they have done for the state's agricultural industry. But the people outside of agriculture – which is now the vast majority of Idahoans – don't know that and that's why it's important to publicly recognize some of the people who have committed their lives to the farming and ranching industry.

As the state's population continues to grow at a rapid rate, it's more important than ever to make sure the rest of Idaho hears about some of the great things happening within the agricultural industry, the governor said.

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Inside Farm Bureau

By Zak Miller
CEO, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

Checking gates

There are few things more beautiful in spring than lush green grass.

After a long winter of white on the landscape and the muddy in-between — when snow retreats but it's still too cold for leaves — it is a welcome relief when the first hints of green appear and then, almost overnight, the world turns lush again.

I love green things, but my excitement for spring goes beyond beauty. Lush green means one thing in my world: the cows get to go to grass.

After a long winter of daily feeding and constant care, everyone — cows and cowboys alike — is ready for the moment when it's just cattle and pasture doing their thing.

I know the cows enjoy it because it's one of the only times I've seen adult animals buck and kick like calves again.

When cattle go to grass, however they arrive, one rule never changes: their new home must be secure. Yearlings especially love to walk the perimeter of any pasture, and regardless

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Photo by Lindsey Miller

A new University of Idaho report shows agriculture has a massive impact on the state’s overall economy.

Report shows agriculture has a huge impact on Idaho’s economy

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – According to a recently released report, agriculture continues to be a major part of Idaho’s economy.

One in every nine jobs in Idaho is tied to the state’s agriculture industry. That means 137,900 jobs in Idaho trace their roots to agriculture.

But that’s not all.

According to a University of Idaho report that was released in early March, the agriculture industry is responsible for 17 percent of total sales in the state, or about $45 billion per year. It also accounts for 12 percent of Idaho’s total gross state product, which is a broad measurement of the value of all goods and services.

The report found that agriculture accounts for more than $8.2 billion in wages in Idaho.

The report – “Economic Contribution of Idaho Agribusiness” – is based on 2024 data and was authored by Phil Watson, a professor at U of I’s College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.

“The contribution of Idaho

agriculture to the state's economy is higher … than it's ever been," Watson said. "Even in real terms – adjusted for inflation – the value of Idaho agriculture continues to grow."

The report found that Idaho agriculture is big and growing. For example, a previous report by Watson based on 2022 data showed ag was responsible for $37.5 billion in sales and 126,800 jobs.

However, the 2022-based report found that ag accounted for 12.8 percent of Idaho's GSP, which means agriculture's total share of the state's economy has dipped a tad.

That's not surprising given how much Idaho's overall population and economy have grown in recent years and the 12 percent of total GSP number is still very impressive, Watson said.

"It's not just ag that's growing in the state," he said. "We have growth in a lot of different sectors. Idaho ag is big and getting bigger, but the rest of the state is also growing fast. That's a good thing. A rising tide can float all ships."

Farmers, ranchers and others involved in the state's agriculture industry understand how important ag is to Idaho and the numbers won't come as a shock to them, said Idaho Farm Bureau Federation President Matt Dorsey, who farms in Canyon County.

That said, he added, the numbers contained in the report are very impressive and should be shared with elected officials and others who might be shocked by them.

"Those are some really big numbers," he said. "In particular, the fact that agriculture is responsible for one in every nine jobs in Idaho should be shared with as many people as possible."

The report, which is conducted by Watson every two or three years, is based on several sources, including data from USDA and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

It includes the direct and indirect impacts that agriculture has in Idaho.

For example, it would include the impact of farm equipment and fertilizer sales, as well as the economic impact of food processing and other jobs affected by the industry.

"This report does an incredible job of showing just how important farming and ranching is to Idaho," said Andi Woolf-Weibye, executive director of the Idaho Bean Commission. "Agriculture literally is the backbone of the state's economy and way of life."

"The fact that agriculture is responsible for one in every nine jobs in Idaho should be shared with as many people as possible."

– Matt Dorsey, president, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

The report shows that agriculture in Idaho accounts for a much larger part of the state's overall economy than it does in neighboring states.

It shows that even without including its indirect impacts, agriculture accounts for 7 percent of Idaho's total GSP.

That is 4.4 times greater than in Washington, 10 times greater than in Nevada, 2.8 times greater than in Oregon, 3.9 times greater than in Utah, 4.1 times greater than in Wyoming, 2.2 times greater than in Montana, and 3.2 times greater than in the United States as a whole.

Agriculture in Washington is a little bigger than it is in Idaho in absolute terms, Watson said, but when you look at it in terms of ag's percentage of the state's total GSP, it isn't even close, he added.

"Agriculture is much more important to Idaho's economy than it is in Washington (and surrounding states)," Watson said.

For many years, the growth of the entire agriculture industry in Idaho was led by farming and ranching itself – Ma and Pa on a tractor. Ma and Pa are still doing their share of the work in that department, but the impact of the state's food processing industry is growing faster overall, the report shows.

That's not a bad thing because it means more of the value-added part of agriculture is being captured within the state, Watson said. Ma and Pa are still producing a lot of farm commodities, but more of these commodities are having value added to them via food processing facilities before they are shipped out of Idaho.

"It's even nicer that we can capture that next stage of processing of ag commodities within the state instead of sending them to (another state) to get processed," Watson said. ■

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Across the countryside, farmers are facing a squeeze on their balance sheets. Input costs remain historically high while prices for many commodities have fallen significantly. At the same time, recent disruptions to global fertilizer markets and shipping routes are creating even more uncertainty around one of farmers' most essential inputs.

All of this is adding to the financial pressure farmers are facing. USDA projects U.S. farm income in 2026 to be $48 billion below the highs we saw just a few years ago.

Farmers are doing what they have always done. They are working harder, becoming more efficient, and adapting to change. Yet many are still struggling to stay ahead.

This challenge is bigger than a single tough year. It reflects deeper changes in the farm economy. If production continues to rise but demand doesn't keep up, prices fall and margins shrink. This is why strengthening demand for American grown agriculture products must be part of the conversation about the future of agriculture.

Strengthening demand for American grown products

Exports will always be critical to American agriculture. Farmers depend on global markets, and we must continue working to expand fair and reliable trade opportunities around the world. But global markets can also be unpredictable.

Global competition is increasing, trade relationships can shift quickly, and supply chain disruptions can send ripple effects through the farm economy. That's why growing demand here at home is so important.

When American families choose food, fuel, and fiber produced by our farmers and ranchers, it strengthens rural economies and supports the people who work every day to feed and fuel our nation.

Biofuels are one example of how strong domestic demand can benefit agriculture. Ethanol and biodiesel have created major markets for crops like corn and soybeans while helping strengthen America's energy security.

Expanding year-round access to E15 and supporting new markets like sustainable aviation fuel can help create more demand for farm products while supporting rural economies.

Another way to strengthen domestic demand is by ensuring that American-grown food is prioritized in programs that serve families across the country.

Millions of meals are served every day through the National School Lunch Program and meals served to our men and women in uniform. When those meals include food grown by American farmers, they provide dependable markets for farmers while supporting the nutrition of families and service members.

Ensuring strong enforcement of Buy American provisions can help make sure these programs support American agriculture whenever possible.

That same principle applies beyond food. Policies like the Buying American Cotton Act are another way Congress can support demand for products grown by American farmers while also supporting domestic manufacturing. When we prioritize American-grown products, we strengthen the entire supply chain.

'Farmers are doing what they have always done. They are working harder, becoming more efficient, and adapting to change. Yet many are still struggling to stay ahead.'

Preserving farmland for the future of American agriculture

At the same time, we must protect the foundation of American agriculture itself. Farmland is more than just land. It is a strategic national asset. Once farmland is converted to other uses, it rarely comes back into production.

According to USDA, we lost 20.1 million acres of farmland between 2017 and 2022, along with more than 175,000 farms.

Keeping farmland economically viable is critical for food security, rural communities, and the future of agriculture. That's why getting a new, modernized farm bill across the finish line remains essential.

The farm bill provides the risk management tools, conservation programs, and research investments that help farmers navigate uncertainty and keep land in production for the next generation.

Keeping American grown products competitive

Farmers don't want to rely on short-term assistance. What we want are strong markets and policies that allow us to compete and succeed.

As I said in my recent testimony, farmers are ready to innovate, adapt, and meet the needs of consumers here at home and around the world. But keeping American agriculture strong will require policies that support growing demand, fair trade opportunities, and reliable farm safety net programs.

Farmers and ranchers are producing at historic levels. Now we must ensure strong market opportunities here at home to keep family farms in business. ■

DORSEY

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"These awards are incredibly important to the state of Idaho," the governor said. "Those of us in agriculture know these people; we know what they've done for our industry. But these awards highlight to the rest of Idaho all the good things we do in agriculture … This is incredibly important to the state of Idaho."

I would agree. As the percentage of people involved in agriculture – less than 2 percent of the population – continues to decline, it's critical that farmers and ranchers tell their story. Recognizing, in a public forum, some of the men and women who have helped make Idaho agriculture what it is today is one way to do that.

Another way is to spread the word yourself, person-to-person or through the use of social media. There are about 22,000 farmers and ranchers in Idaho. Imagine the impact it would have if each one of you shared your farm or ranch's story with a few people.

A national Gallup poll found that Americans trust those involved in farming more than any other industry or business sector. People outside of ag are hungry to learn more about where their food comes from. Tell them.

You can read about this year's Ag Summit on page 26.

Another event that publicly recognizes Idaho farmers and ranchers is the Eastern Idaho Agriculture Hall of Fame. That event took place March 20, the same day this magazine was headed to the printer. You can read about that event and some more of the amazing men and women who have contributed to the state's ag industry in the May edition of this magazine.

There's another issue I want to touch on. It's a tough one: farmer suicide.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, farmers take their own lives at a rate double that of the national average. And right now, farmers are facing one of the toughest financial environments in agriculture ever. Crop prices continue to decline, in some cases dramatically, while overall input costs remain near record levels.

That's why I would encourage each of you to check on your farmer neighbors. We farmers like to think of ourselves as ruggedly independent and we are. But we're also human and we sometimes struggle like other humans.

'We farmers like to think of ourselves as ruggedly independent and we are. But we're also human and we sometimes struggle like other humans.'

Let your neighbor know you're there for them. What would it take for you to tell them, "Hey, can you show me around your farm for five minutes?" Maybe they're going through a rough time and all they need is for a fellow farmer to get in the mud with them.

Try to communicate with them. More than anything, just be there for them and let them know you care.

If you see someone withdrawing from family or friends or not participating in regular activities, try to reach out to them. The worst thing you can do if someone is hurting is nothing. ■

MILLER

Continued from page 2

of how tall the grass or how clean the water, if there's a gap in the fence, they will find it — and chaos will follow.

I recall one beautiful spring day delivering heifers to pasture, watching them frolic in the grass, feeling confident the work was done. About 30 minutes down the road, my brother called to inform me those same heifers were heading down the highway toward town. The conversation that followed was not exactly enriching.

Luckily, the heifers were escorted home and the open gate was closed. The lesson I carry from that day is simple: I assumed the person who checked the fence in spring had also closed the gate. They assumed I would close it when I turned the heifers in.

Both assumptions made sense. Mine was wrong.

If either of us had checked that gate, the incident never would have happened. To my fellow cattlemen and women — yes, it was my mistake, and I'll own it the rest of my days.

But that kind of thinking — assuming someone else has it covered — shows up in places far more consequential than a spring pasture.

Next month, we go to the ballot box for the May primary. In Idaho, primary races are often the elections that truly determine who represents us in Boise for the next two years.

In 2024, only 28% of registered voters cast a ballot in the primary. One in four. That means three out of four Idahoans sat out the very election that shaped their representation.

Farm Bureau members work hard to build strong policy for agriculture — and they do a darn good job. But here's the truth: policy is only as good as the people elected to carry it out.

The best agricultural policy in the world means nothing if the wrong person holds the pen. Good officials are found when many people vote. Thin voter turnout shrinks the wisdom base of choosing our elected officials and the rest of us have to live with that outcome.

The primary is where it starts. It is where representatives are made or unmade — often before most people are paying attention. Don't assume someone else will check that gate.

We all need to add our check to the ballot box. ■

Some help on the way for sugar beet farmers

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

Submitted photo

USDA will provide $150 million in assistance to American sugar beet and sugar cane farmers. This news was welcomed by Idaho's 400-plus sugar beet farmers.

POCATELLO – USDA's Feb. 20 announcement that the federal government will provide $150 million in assistance to American sugar beet and sugar cane farmers came as welcome news to Idaho's 400-plus sugar beet growers.

More help is needed by the beleaguered industry, which is facing a massive drop in farm-level prices, but the assistance is much appreciated, said Samantha Parrott, executive director of the Snake River Sugarbeet Growers Association.

Parrott estimates sugar beet farmers will receive roughly $120 per acre from that $150 million, which is for sugar beet and sugar cane growers. That might seem like a good amount until you realize the sugar beet association estimates its growers lost, on average, about $500-600 per acre on the 2025 crop.

"We need more (assistance), but we're appreciative of the administration to get some funding and we continue to bring that message to D.C. that we need more help," she said.

Idaho farmers typically plant about 170,000 acres of sugar beets and that crop is known as a cash crop in Idaho, meaning a grower can make some decent money off of them some years.

But as is the case now, a farmer can also lose some big money when the price they receive for their beets is far less than what it costs to grow them.

Parrott said the price that sugar beet growers receive for their commodity has declined by 42 percent over the past two years.

"Our sugar beet growers are really struggling right now," she said. "We're seeing a total market collapse and that's due to a historic over-supply of sugar on our market."

This over-supply, she said, is coming from foreign countries with heavily subsidized sugar industries that are dumping sugar on the world market, which is finding its way into the U.S. and displacing American sugar.

According to a USDA news release, the $150 million in assistance to sugar beet and sugar cane growers is "in response to temporary market disruptions and increased production and processing costs."

"USDA will work with sugar processors in the coming months to finalize agreements that will deliver assistance directly to farmer-members," the USDA news release states.

While the USDA announcement was welcomed by the sugar industry, it didn't happen by chance.

In December, 20 sugar farmers, including three from Idaho, joined Parrott and other industry leaders on an emergency fly-in to Washington, D.C., to request economic aid.

The fly-in included visits, as an industry, with 100 congressional offices, 10 visits across the White House, USDA, U.S. Treasury Department and the U.S. Trade Representative's office.

"We told our story of how bad things are in (sugar) country right now and let them know that we needed the president to act," Parrott said. "It's because of that fly-in that sugar was included in the president's economic aid package."

The Snake River Sugarbeet Growers Association represents about 600 farmers in Idaho, Oregon and Washington, that plant a combined 180,000 acres of sugar beets each year.

These beets – each one is about the size of a football when fully mature – are sold to Amalgamated Sugar Co., which is owned by growers in the three states.

Amalgamated growers combined typically grow about 12 percent of the sugar consumed in the United States.

U.S. sugar comes from sugar beets or sugar cane. Both have a really high sugar content. In Idaho, sugar beets contain about 18 percent sugar and one beet contains about one cup of sugar.

Idaho ranks No. 2 in the nation in total sugar beet production and the industry has an estimated $1 billion-plus impact on the state's economy. Amalgamated is one of Idaho's largest private employers.

Sugar beets are particularly important in many rural parts of Idaho, where they normally pay the bills for a lot of farmers and help underpin the local economy. ■

Potato growers face some tough challenges

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – It's been a tough couple of years for U.S. and Idaho potato growers. The prices that spud farmers have been receiving for their product are well below what it costs to produce them, creating a difficult financial situation.

With China, India and other nations quickly emerging as competitors in the spud world, other challenges loom as well.

To be sure, Idaho is still the main player in the United States when it comes to potato production. This state produces about a third of the nation's total potato supply and the potato world domestically still revolves around Idaho.

A presenter made that clear during the Idaho Potato Commission's annual Big Idaho Potato Harvest Meeting in November.

"Keep being Idaho. Keep doing what you're doing. Keep growing a lot of Idaho potatoes," said Tim Grass, director of produce at Associate Wholesale Grocers, the largest retailer-owned cooperative in the United States, with 3,500 grocery stores. "Idaho potatoes are very, very important to our retailers … and their consumers. You guys are the top of the heap."

But the Idaho and U.S. potato industry in general is facing some stiff challenges right now. The main one is financial – low farm-level prices – and it's caused by the usual suspect: more supply than demand.

As an example, the North American Potato Market News' grower return index shows that open-market prices for Russet potatoes are well below $2 per hundred pounds (cwt).

It cost farmers about $8-9 per cwt to grow those spuds and if a farmer stored them through February, the actual cost would be about $12-14 per cwt.

"It's really bad," said NAPMN owner Ben Eborn. "Open-market prices are way, way below break-even right now."

Farm-level potato prices "are about down to where they can't get any lower," said Oakley potato farmer Randy Hardy.

"The last three years have been exceptionally difficult on grower returns," Idaho Potato Commission CEO Jamey Higham said during the potato harvest meeting.

Another, growing challenge is the emergence of China and other nations as major competitors in the global potato market.

On a bright note, global demand for potatoes keeps growing, Potatoes USA CEO Blair Richardson said during the harvest meeting.

"The bottom line is, people really like potatoes," he said. "World fry demand is strong."

The not-so-good news is that other countries are getting in on the processed potato game, some in a big way. Such as China.

China will soon become the world's largest potato grower and will pass total production of the entire European continent in the next year or two, Richardson said.

India is also coming up quickly and had 32 percent production growth over the past year. Southeast Asian countries are also producing more spuds. And Africa. And South America.

"A lot of countries are starting to get into this game," Richarson said.

"We're looking at a different global market for potatoes than what we've looked at for the past 30-plus years," he said. "We have competitors that we never even thought about competing against that are now competing with a good, quality product."

What's the solution? For one, Richardson noted, the U.S. is a net importer of potatoes.

"Maybe we need to focus on becoming a net exporter of potatoes again," he said. "Maybe we need to refocus even more of our time, energy and resources on our U.S. foodservice operators and consumers. It's the one area that we can reach the most with the least amount of money."

"So, I think that we really have to double down in the United States and rebuild our base here and quit losing opportunities to international companies that are figuring this our faster than we are," Richardson said.

"We're aware of what we need to do and we're going to be relooking at how we're allocating resources toward these things over the next couple of years," he added.

Twenty percent of the potatoes produced in the United Stated are exported in some form. Opening new export markets could help ease the financial strain being felt in potato country, National Potato Council CEO Kam Quarles told the potato harvest meeting participants.

Opening Japan to fresh potato imports from the U.S. is the domestic industry's top priority, he said.

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.

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

"Their strategy is very clear: They want to negotiate with us, but they don't want the negotiations to ever conclude," he said. "That protects (their) market. If you never get to the finish line, their market remains closed to us."

"We are going to stay on this until we get the right response," Quarles said.

Potatoes are sorted in a Bingham County field in this Idaho Farm Bureau Federation file photo.

"Japan is our biggest opportunity globally right now," Richardson said. "We've got to get Japan open for fresh potatoes."

Keeping the Mexico market open to fresh U.S. potatoes is also a major priority, Higham said.

The U.S. fought for decades to open all of Mexico to fresh U.S. potato imports. Every time the U.S. industry appeared to be close to achieving that goal, Mexico's potato industry successfully put up a roadblock.

But in May 2022, U.S. potatoes were allowed to be exported into all of Mexico, following a unanimous decision by the Mexican Supreme Court in favor of U.S. potato growers.

Keeping that market open and expanding it while preventing any future roadblock attempts is a high priority, Higham said.

"I know we've just scratched the surface of what we can sell down there," he said. "As we move forward, there will be more potential for (fresh) potatoes going into Mexico."

"Everything we export, that is less pressure on the domestic market," Higham added. "A rising tide lifts all boats."

During the potato harvest meeting, presenters stressed the need for the U.S. potato industry to remain united and keep working together.

The National Potato Council, Potatoes USA, the Idaho Potato Commission and other industry groups and leaders already work well together and they need to continue doing that to solve some of the industry's biggest challenges, Richardson said.

"Demand doesn't happen overnight," he said. "We have to do it with a strategic approach, but we don't do this alone. All of these groups working together is what protects the demand in the future for this industry." ■

Photo by Carolyn Firth

CREP field in Minidoka County.

‘Perfect storm’ of ag factors at play could increase appeal for CREP

By Steve Stuebner
Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission

The summer of 2026 could be hot, dry and challenging for Southern Idaho farmers, but there may be a silver lining emerging – a “perfect storm” of factors converging that might compel producers to enroll in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).

CREP is a partnership program between the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the state of Idaho that provides incentive payments to farmers to idle marginal irrigated cropland and conserve groundwater.

With many commodity prices below the break-even point for producers, and some farmers facing the possibility that they may be exceeding their water allotments under the state’s 2024 Water Settlement Agreement, enrolling some acres in CREP might be an attractive option right now, officials said.

“We are hearing from some groundwater districts that some of their members are approaching their fixed groundwater allocation,” said Mat Weaver, director of the Idaho Department of Water Resources. “Based on current pumping rates, some members may exhaust their individual four-year allocations before the end of the term.”

“So we’re thinking the CREP program dovetails quite nicely with other groundwater conservation programs that we have in the state; it could be a valuable program to consider,” Weaver said.

“We would very much like to maximize CREP enrollment in Idaho,” he added. “We think it might be advantageous for water users to strike now while the iron is hot, before nationwide enrollment limits are met.”

Adds George Hitz, Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission (SWCC) deputy administrator: "We'd encourage Idaho's conservation districts in the Eastern Snake Plain to help us with our outreach on CREP."

Districts can help by:

- Educating irrigators about the program and benefits.
- Spreading the word to neighbors and farmers in their districts when there is an open enrollment.
- Looking at the benefits of CREP enrollment where croplands overlie areas with a limited groundwater supply, such as groundwater management areas or critical groundwater management areas designated in Southern Idaho by the Idaho Department of Water Resources.
- Evaluating cropland overlying areas with high nitrates in groundwater or other water quality issues.
- Looking at cropland that could be idled to reduce wind erosion or improve wildlife habitat.

CREP incentives

Last year, FSA created a sign-up incentive payment (SIP) for CREP, a one-time payment of 32.5 percent of their total annual payment. SIP is expected to incentivize producers to sign up.

In past years, when commodity prices were high, CREP rental rates were lagging behind. Today, that's not the case.

The CREP rental rates vary by county. Check with your local FSA office to determine your local rate.

The state will provide an incentive direct payment of 13 percent of the federal annual rental payment for CREP.

For example, if a producer enrolls 100 acres in the program, and the CREP rental rate is $300 per acre, they would receive an annual CREP payment of $30,000 per year.

The state 13 percent match would add an additional $3,900 a year in a direct matching payment to the producer. And SIP would provide a one-time incentive payment of $9,750.

Brad Buttars, manager of the Bonneville-Jefferson Groundwater District, said his producers are paying attention to the dynamics at play this year with CREP, and his water users are interested in learning more about the program.

"I think the word is out," Buttars said. "If our water users have already used more water in each irrigation season than they were allowed under the settlement agreement, they need to look at some alternatives before they run out of water. And if there's a way that they can get paid on a per-acre basis to idle some cropland, that's a whole lot better than having to idle some farm ground and get nothing for it."

Under the 2024 Water Settlement Agreement, junior groundwater users were given a reduced water allotment of 205,000 acre-feet per year. That averages out to a decrease of about 11 percent, spread out among 12 groundwater districts in the Eastern Snake Plain region.

Seven of the groundwater districts already have some cropland enrolled in CREP, but there is room for more to apply.

"I think people are taking a stronger look at CREP right now," said Braden Jensen, director of government affairs for Idaho Farm Bureau Federation.

Rob Sharpnack, the state CREP manager

CREP current enrollment in Southern Idaho groundwater districts

GW Districts	Contracts	Fields	Acres	Groundwater Savings (ac.-ft.)	FSA Rental Payment	State Match Payment	Total Payment
Aberdeen-American Falls	13	34	1,798	3,597	$404,763	$41,844	$446,607
Bingham	17	45	2,038	4,076	$483,265	$58,850	$542,115
Bonneville-Jefferson	2	8	51	101	$7,152	$560	$7,712
Jefferson Clark	4	8	43	85	$6,540	$759	$7,299
Magic Valley	60	322	3,535	7,071	$952,960	$121,199	$1,074,159
North Snake	4	17	428	856	$118,468	$15,401	$133,869
Raft River	20	87	1,605	3,211	$308,961	$22,155	$331,116
	120	**521**	**9,498**	**18,996**	**$2,282,109**	**$260,768**	**$2,542,877**

for SWCC, came to the Farm Bureau's legislative committee and gave a presentation recently.

"I was surprised at the level of questions being asked," Jensen said. "There appears to be more interest in the program this year."

How the CREP program works

Overall in Idaho, the CREP program, first started in 2006, is specifically designed to reduce groundwater withdrawals from the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA). It's one of many initiatives currently under way to reduce pumping and restore the aquifer to a sustainable level. Estimates indicate the ESPA is over-drafted by about 200,000 acre-feet per year.

CREP is a national program related to the USDA Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Currently, there is a national cap of 27 million acres to be enrolled in CRP, and 1.9 million acres for CREP. That nationwide limit has not been reached, as yet.

Since the CREP program started 20 years ago, Idaho farm acreage enrollments have led to a cumulative savings of 622,529 acre-feet of pumped groundwater in the ESPA over that period, according to the SWCC.

If the CREP program were maximized in Idaho by enrolling an additional 40,000 acres of irrigated cropland, that could save about a million acre-feet of water in the ESPA over ten years.

If producers enroll in CREP, they need to work with SWCC staff to develop a conservation plan for the cropland involved. They must voluntarily idle cropland and stop irrigation use for a period of 10 years.

Only farmers who irrigate with groundwater are eligible. They must have been irrigating the land enrolled in CREP the last four out of six years.

The producers are required to plant a seed mix, including native grasses and forbs, in the place of the crop. Participating farms do not lose their water rights while they're enrolled in CREP. They retain their full water rights, Sharpnack said.

They can use the water associated with the idled cropland once again if they chose to go back to growing crops after the 10-year period.

Five years ago, CREP enrollment was dropping because of high commodity prices. Some producers who had been under contract with CREP chose to terminate those contracts and start growing crops again to make more money.

At its peak, nearly 20,000 acres of cropland were enrolled in CREP, leading to water savings of about 40,000 acre-feet per year. Currently, CREP has about 9,727 acres enrolled in the program for a net water savings of 19,453 acre-feet per year.

One acre-foot is the amount of water it takes to flood one acre of land to the depth of one foot.

A total of 50,000 acres of land in Southern Idaho is open to CREP enrollment in 23 counties, including some counties in the western Snake Plain such as Elmore County and a few portions of Ada County.

With enrollment only covering about 10,000 acres, there is room for many producers to enroll in the program on 40,000 acres of irrigated cropland.

Producer feedback on CREP program

"It's been good for us," said Todd Harris, a producer who co-owns a family farm and ranch in the Soda Springs area and Malta.

The Harris family enrolled about 1,200 acres of cropland in CREP about 19 years ago.

"The crop prices were low at the time, and we were looking at a drought year," he said. "Right now, we're kind of in the same situation, plus power rates are going up, and everything costs more to grow a crop. The additional money from the Water Board is going to help as well."

Producers need to know that they will have to make a long-term commitment, he said, enrolling acres in the program for 10 years to meet the terms of the CREP contract.

"It was a huge struggle getting the native grasses established," Harris said. "We put in 1,200 acres of native plant seeds, irrigated it, and we couldn't get it very well established. And then the weeds came in, so we had to deal with that."

Today, FSA allows a diverse seed mix which will grow better in the Eastern Idaho climate. "That helped using the different seed

mix," Harris said. "Just getting it established is the hard part."

SWCC staff will assist producers with the seeding plans and provide details about the best seed mix, Sharpnack said.

Harris said he recommends taking a look at CREP if farmers have some marginal cropland producing meager crops, or if CREP would be an advantage to reduce their water use, or both.

"I do wish they'd let you graze it; that would make those idled fields more productive," he said.

Under the rules, idled cropland put into CREP cannot be grazed by livestock unless an emergency drought declaration has been declared for a particular county, with approval.

Dean Stevenson, a Rupert sugar beet farmer and chairman of the Magic Valley Groundwater District, said he has had a good experience with the CREP program. He enrolled a number of pivot corners into CREP; about 115 acres in the early 2000s.

He has since enrolled more acres on farm ground that he shares with his brother.

"When we enrolled in CREP, the farm economy was rough, and CREP looked like a good alternative," Stevenson said. "I used to irrigate those pivot corners with hand lines, so I just eliminated watering those corners and the labor associated with that."

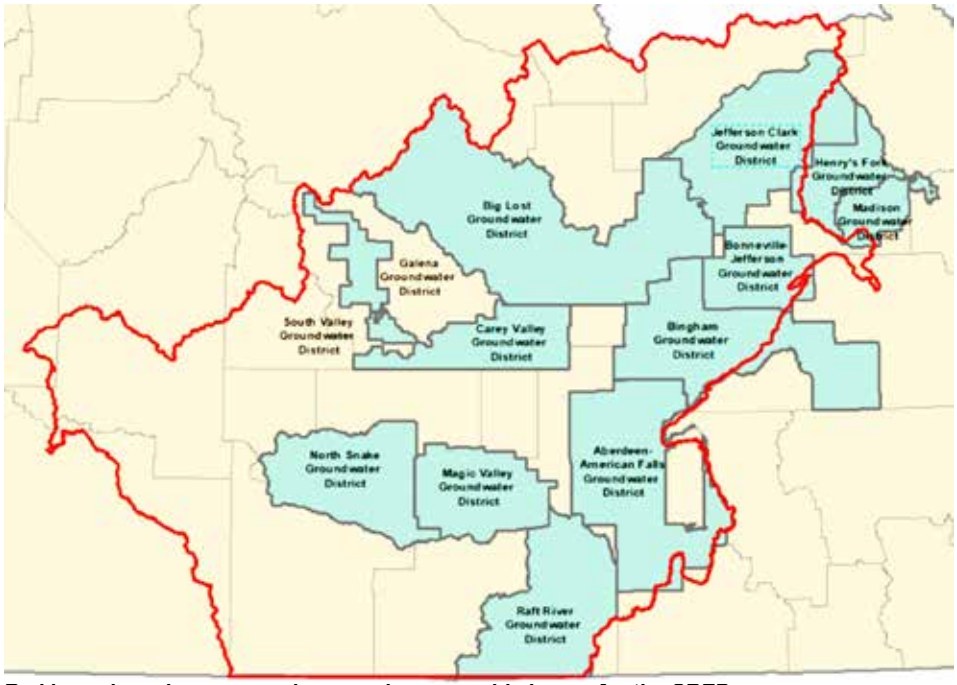
As a member of the Magic Valley Groundwater District, the water that Stevenson saves through CREP also counts toward the 11 percent reduction he's required to achieve under the 2024 Water Settlement Agreement.

"That made it easier to do my reduction because I was in CREP," he said. "It wasn't as big of a hit."

"CREP has worked well for me," he said. "We kind of have a lot of stars aligned right now to make the program pretty attractive with prices down and water being tight, I hope people will take a strong look at it."

Farmers who have water rights with trust water or enlargement limitations "should take a hard look at CREP," he said. Those water rights could be undermined if Snake River minimum flows are not met at the Swan Falls gauge.

Even though there is the potential for enrolling 40,000 acres of irrigated cropland in CREP in Southern Idaho, Stevenson points out that the program has some sideboards on how much income a single producer can receive.



Red boundary shows area where producers could sign up for the CREP program.

That cap is $50,000 a year per farm owner, Sharpnack said.

"They have a payment limitation that FSA will calculate," Stevenson said. "You can't just go out and put a couple of thousand acres in CREP."

Stevenson also pointed out that the groundwater right idled during the 10-year CREP contract cannot be used on other crops, and the CREP seeding is supposed to be left alone with no irrigation or grazing. "You can't divert the water while it's in CREP, and you can't transfer it either."

He agreed that it's challenging to keep the weeds and rodents out of the seeded fields. "We have had some issues with cheatgrass, but now we have a pretty good stand of crested wheat on our CREP ground."

SWCC officials will inspect the fields on a periodic basis to ensure that the CREP rules are being followed, officials said.

Why CREP is important

The ESPA has tremendous significance to the communities of Southern and Eastern Idaho and the whole state. It is known as a sole-source freshwater aquifer that provides safe drinking water to more than 400,000 residents and 18 cities, irrigation water for more than 1 million acres of cropland, and water for many commercial and industrial businesses, from malt and barley plants to potato processing and cheese manufacturing plants.

The ESPA region produces about 21 percent of all goods and services within the state, resulting in an estimated annual value of $10 billion. Water is the critical element that supports everything.

The ESPA has been in decline since the 1950s. Recent aquifer-enhancement activities, including recharge efforts, groundwater district reductions, cloud seeding, and groundwater to surface water conversion projects, are all contributing to stabilize the aquifer over time.

The CREP program is one more tool in the toolbox that would help stabilize the aquifer, officials said.

For more information on CREP, go to: http://swc.idaho.gov. ■

(Steve Stuebner is a regular contributor to Conservation the Idaho Way.)

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Idaho had normal precip, but less snow this winter

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Most areas in Idaho received a near-normal amount of precipitation this year. The problem, as far as the state's 2026 water supply outlook is concerned, is that much of it came in the form of rain rather than snow.

Rain is good but snow is what fills the state's reservoirs, which supply water for farmers, recreationists, subdivisions and more during the hot, dry summer months.

Snowpack in many basins around the state is below average for this time of year and it doesn't look to get much better before April, the time when Idaho mountains normally reach peak snowpack.

The Idaho Water Supply Committee met March 13 in Boise to provide updates on how the state's 2026 water supply looks. The reports weren't great.

"Things are pretty concerning for … the water supply this year," said Erin Whorton, a water supply specialist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Most Idaho basins received adequate precipitation this year, but a lot of it came as rain.

"Overall, we have pretty normal precipitation … but not a lot of snow," said David Hoekema, a hydrologist with the Idaho Department of Water Resources.

The reason: abnormally warm temperatures.

Hoekema said 1934 is the warmest winter ever recorded in Idaho. With unusually high temperatures forecast for the near-term, "We should be in the running … to compete with 1934," he said.

The difference, he said, is that 1934 had a terribly dry winter while this year the state has at least received a near-normal amount of precipitation.

For example, the Payette basin had 104 percent of average precipitation as of March 17 but only 70 percent of average snowpack. The Henry's Fork and Teton basins had 102 percent of average precip but 81 percent of average snowpack. The Snake basin above Palisades had 113 percent of average precip and 95 percent of average snowpack.

"Precipitation by and large has been normal but, man, it's been warm," said Mark Robertson, a water supply specialist with M3Works and a member of the water supply committee.

"It's been extremely warm this winter," said Troy Lundquist, a hydrologist with the National Weather Service in Boise. "Water year to date, precip is near normal across Idaho (but) current snowpack is generally well below normal, except in the highest elevations."

According to the water committee, there is record low snowpack below 7,000 feet in most Idaho basins.

Idaho's water year begins Oct. 1 and the state's peak snowpack typically occurs the first part of April.

The state normally has 84 percent of its peak snowpack by mid-March but this year that number is only 64 percent, Whorton said.

"We are 20 percent behind and it doesn't look like we will catch up," she said.

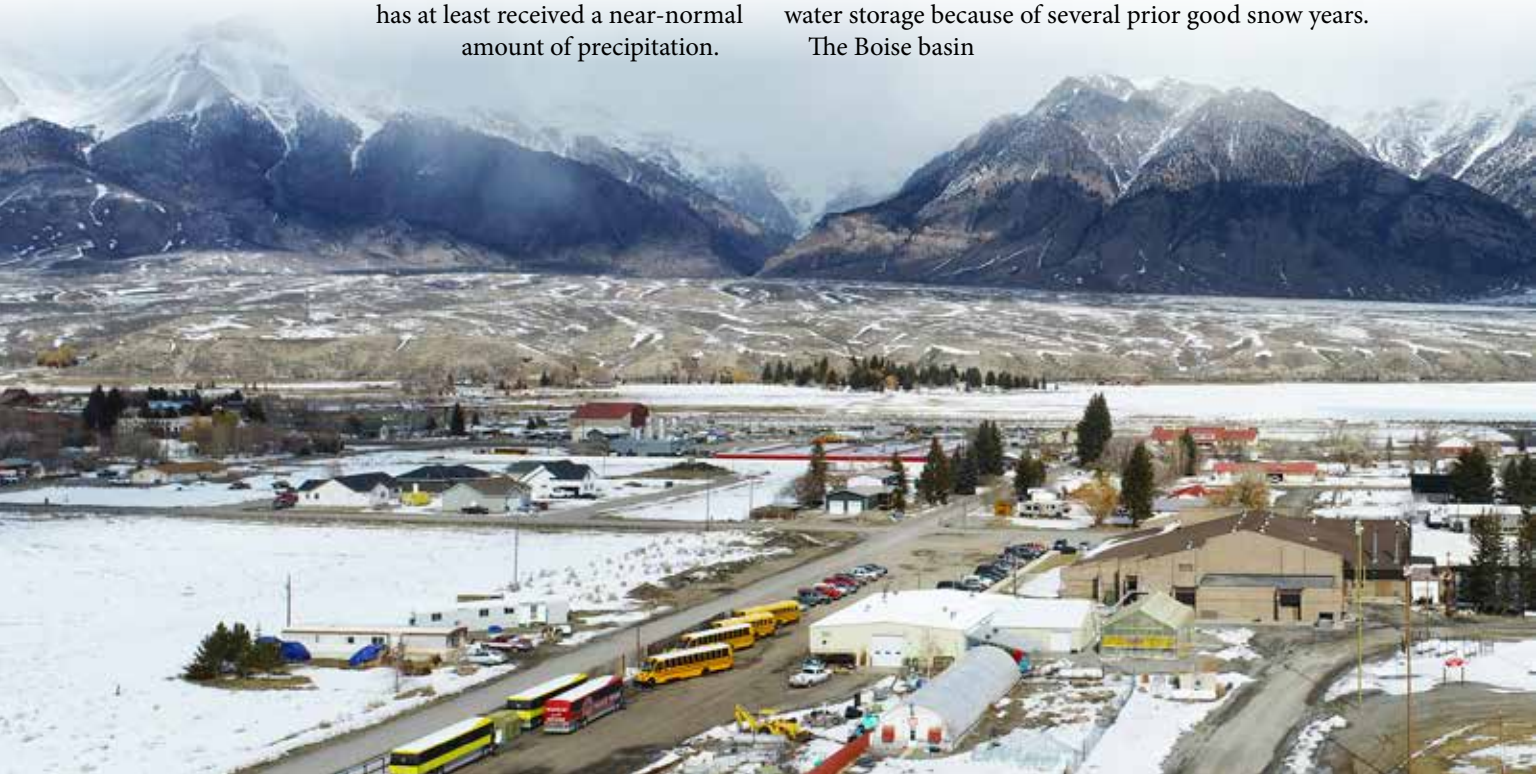
Some areas of the state are better off when it comes to the 2026 water supply outlook.

There is record low snowpack in many basins along the southern part of the state.

"The water supply is going to be pretty tight this year (in those areas)," Whorton said.

An exception is the Bear River basin, which only had 81 percent of normal snowpack as of March 17 but has a good amount of water storage because of several prior good snow years.

The Boise basin



Most Idaho basins received near-normal precipitation this year, but much of it came down as rain rather than snow. This could lead to a tight water supply in many parts of the state this year. Photos by Joel Benson

had 97 percent of average precip and 72 percent of average snowpack but the water supply in that region is looking okay thanks to an adequate amount of water storage built up from prior good snowpack years.

All basins in northern Idaho have near-record-low snowpack for the fourth year in a row, although total precipitation in those areas is above normal.

Unlike other basins, the central mountains received higher-than-normal snowpack and precipitation. "We had a good snow buildup there," Hoekema said.

The Upper Snake reservoirs were 66 percent full as of March 13, which is 95 percent of average.

The Upper Snake system feeds Water District 1, Idaho's largest and most important water district. That area has below-average snowpack and started the water year with a low amount of carryover water in its reservoir system.

The upper Snake reservoir system can hold 4.1 million acre-feet of water, enough to supply well over 1 million acres of farmland in eastern and southern Idaho with irrigation water.

The Upper Snake River reservoir system on March 13 was holding about 2.6 million acre-feet of water, which is 550,000 acre-feet less than at this time last year. Spring runoff forecasts in the Upper

Snake range from 70-90 percent of normal, depending on whether that area has a dry or wet spring.

The water outlook this year for irrigators in that district could hinge on how much precipitation there is this spring, said Craig Chandler, the watermaster for Water District 1.

"All things are pointing to a below-average water year," he said. "We would need an above-average precipitation in the spring in order to get to a decent … water supply this year." ■

Southeast Asia Presents Expanding Opportunities for Idaho Agriculture

Sydney Kennedy, Idaho State Department of Agriculture

The Idaho State Department of Agriculture (ISDA) Market Development Division helps Idaho agricultural companies expand into international markets by building relationships, identifying buyers and reducing barriers to trade. ISDA supports these efforts through a network of international trade offices, including Idaho's most established trade office located in Taiwan, which plays a key role in expanding Idaho exports in the Southeast Asia region.

Southeast Asia represents a particularly significant opportunity for Idaho agriculture. The region is home to more than 600 million people, a rapidly growing middle class and increasing demand for high-quality, imported food products. Countries like Vietnam are importing more dairy, grains and protein, creating immense potential for Idaho agricultural products to enter the market.

Idaho is seeing growing opportunities in markets like Vietnam, with exports totaling $8 million in 2025, including $4.5 million in food and agricultural products. Dairy products and hay were Idaho's leading agricultural exports to Vietnam in 2025. Looking ahead, the state sees strong potential for expanding exports of cattle genetics, dairy ingredients, wheat, hops and pulses.

Lt. Governor Bedke and Director Tewalt tour of ABC Bakery.

To help Idaho businesses capitalize on this growing demand, ISDA led an agricultural trade mission to Vietnam this past winter, accompanied by Lieutenant Governor Scott Bedke and 12 Idaho businesses and organizations.

The participating companies and commodity groups included Brocke & Sons, Commercial Creamery, Dairy West, Driscoll Top Hay, Glanbia Nutritionals, High Desert Milk, Idaho Hop Growers Commission, Idaho Potato Commission, Idaho Wheat Commission, Redox Bio-Nutrients, Sage Hill Northwest, and Simplot Animal Sciences.

Notable meetings throughout the trade mission included TH Group, VinaBeco, THACO, Ministry of Agriculture and Environment, Nutifood and Vinamilk.

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"The lieutenant governor's leadership helped open doors at the highest levels, and the conversations we had will support long-term growth for Idaho farmers, ranchers and food processors," said ISDA Director Chanel Tewalt.

Collectively, participating companies have reported just over $2.5 million in Vietnam sales since the trade mission, underscoring the tangible value of these in-country efforts.

Lt. Governor Bedke and members of tje Idaho delegation discuss opportunities with Vinamilk officials in Ho Chi Minh City.

Feedback from participating companies highlights the strong impact of the mission. Several businesses reported gaining new customers and developing a pipeline of prospective buyers they will continue to cultivate in the coming months. Companies also noted increased exposure and promotion of their products throughout the region, with some indicating they are becoming more widely recognized brands in the Vietnamese market.

For Driscoll Top Hay, many Vietnamese dairy farms now prioritize working with them when developing new feeding programs.

"Thanks to ISDA's strong support and promotion, Driscoll Top Hay has become one of the most recognized alfalfa hay brands in the Vietnam market," Robert Li, Deputy General Manager of Sales for Driscoll Top Hay, stated.

Vietnam continues to be a growing market for U.S. food and agriculture, and Idaho's agriculture and food processing industries are well positioned to meet that demand.

Through trade missions, market development programs and its network of international offices, ISDA remains committed to building partnerships, connecting companies with buyers abroad and strengthening long-term export growth for the state's agricultural industry.

U.S. Wheat and Idaho delegation welcomed by Asia Bakery & Confectionary Joint Stock Company (ABC Bakery).

Director Tewalt, Lt. Governor Bedke and a Simplot representative tour THACO Group's beef cattle operation.

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Managing brooms in Idaho's forests

By Timothy Prather
University of Idaho

Managing shrubs in new and young tree plantings can take several forms, often involving herbicide treatment to specific shrubs, avoiding the young trees or herbicides applied as a broadcast treatment prior to planting.

In addition to our native shrubs, we do have several invasive shrubs that can affect new plantings like a group of noxious weeds called the brooms. The most common broom in Idaho is Scotch broom. Scotch broom and other brooms were introduced as ornamental shrubs.

They have beautiful yellow and orange flowers, shaped like pea blossoms (they are in the pea family).

Once problems arose with Scotch broom escaping our landscapes and moving into forest and

TOP: **The most common broom in Idaho is the Scotch broom.** BOTTOM: **Brooms are on Idaho's noxious weed list.** Submitted photos

meadow habitats, it was placed on Idaho's noxious weed list.

Sale of this ornamental shrub continued to be a problem, and additional fines were adopted to make it more expensive to pay fines than were received in sales.

Unfortunately, other brooms began to be sold and especially varieties of brooms that were hybrids between two brooms, commonly Scotch broom and French broom.

A weed superintendent from Bonner County, Brad Bluemer, was instrumental in amending the weed listing to include all related brooms.

None of the brooms were native to North America and so the entire group was added to the noxious weed list to avoid continued sale of hybrids and other brooms.

Scotch broom continues to be the species most commonly found in Idaho. Another broom found in some warmer areas, Portuguese broom may also be able to survive in parts of Idaho but likely will be killed by cold temperatures.

Scotch and Portuguese brooms can be hard to distinguish. Both shrubs have one or two flowers in leaf axils. Both tend to drop their leaves during summer and they both have three leaflets on older stems, single leaf on young stems.

If you cut a stem of Scotch broom in half, you will see five ridges and Portuguese broom has eight to 10 small ridges.

French broom is another broom that may survive in Idaho. It has leaves with three leaflets and the leaves stay on the plant during summer. French broom has four to 10 flowers on short branches. If you cut a stem, it has eight to 10 small ridges visible in cross-section.

Significant efforts have been dedicated to control, primarily in Northern Idaho. There are several methods that can be used for control that include mechanical, cultural and herbicidal.

Unfortunately, the seeds are long-lived; some seeds live for 80 years. Cutting brooms near the ground level can kill them but they will resprout if not cut during the dry season (July and August).

Cutting followed by burning prior to planting can stimulate many seeds to germinate and then those seedlings can be sprayed with one of several herbicides. The active ingredients in the herbicides that are effective include glyphosate, imazapyr, and triclopyr.

Burning does stimulate seeds to germinate, so that is an effective way to reduce the seed bank once the seedlings have been controlled.

Goats have also been used but they would best be used once young trees are a bit taller or for control in the understory. Research in other countries demonstrated four to five years of goat grazing dramatically reduced shrubs and could be a viable tool when used years prior to tree harvest.

Fall or spring application of glyphosate, imazapyr or triclopyr are all effective. Glyphosate spot-sprayed on shrubs is most effective during flowering. Both imazapyr and triclopyr can be applied as a basal bark treatment that use an oil as a carrier for the herbicide that aids herbicide movement into the stem.

Basal bark treatments limit the amount of herbicide used and keep the spray more focused to avoid affecting other species you are trying to keep. Basal bark treatments are effective in the fall, which is great because it reduces how hot you get when spot spraying.

Foliar applications of herbicides can be accomplished prior to planting either as broadcast treatments or spot treatments. After planting, these herbicides can still be used when spot spraying.

Another treatment that is very economical is a single stream nozzle applicator with 2 or 4 % glyphosate, sprayed in a zig-zag pattern across the shrub (drizzle application).

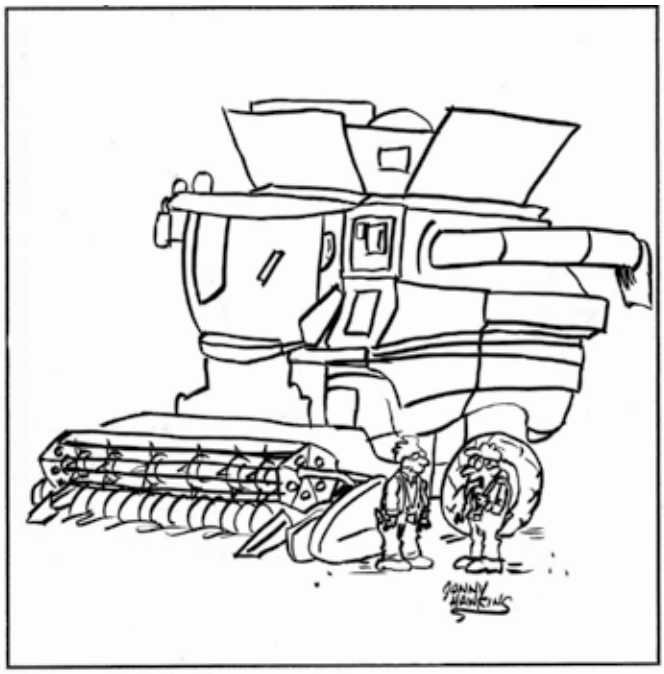
Both triclopyr and imazapyr also are effective using this drizzle application method.

We are lucky in the Pacific Northwest to have three universities that work together to provide resources for weed control. The section for forestry is listed here: https://pnwhandbooks.org/weed/forestry-hybrid-cottonwoods/forestry/vegetation-control-herbicides.

Another great resource is an excerpt from a book co-authored by many of us in the West, an effort led by Joe DiTomaso, now retired, at UC Davis. It can be found here: https://ucanr.edu/sites/default/files/2020-05/326158.pdf. ■

(Tim Prather is a professor in the Plant Sciences Department at the University of Idaho. He can be reached at tprather@uidaho.edu.)

Country Chuckles
By Jonny Hawkins



"You mean to tell me, Erwin, that you put that all together that fast yourself with no leftover parts?!"

Idahoans honored for their support of agriculture

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

BOISE – People who have made significant contributions to Idaho's agricultural industry were honored for their efforts Feb. 17 during the state's annual Ag Summit.

The Larry Branen Idaho Ag Summit is organized and presented each year by Leadership Idaho Agriculture.

It is attended by several hundred farmers, ranchers and other leaders of the state's agricultural industry, and guest speakers and others address an array of ag-related topics.

The conference is named after Branen, a retired University of Idaho researcher who was raised on a farm near Wilder and has served as the dean of the university's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.

Leadership Idaho Agriculture is the only leadership organization in Idaho that works to directly cultivate leaders in agriculture.

Since 1985, LIA has offered a concentrated, hands-on learning experience to enhance and build leadership qualities, while developing advocates for agriculture and rural communities

During the summit, two of the guest speakers who are not from Idaho congratulated Ag Summit organizers and the state's ag industry in general.

"Much respect to Idaho agriculture and the intentionality you put around your leadership program," said guest speaker Ray Starling, who has served in the White House under President Donald Trump and also as chief of staff at USDA.

"You are blessed here in Idaho to have some fantastic people and organizations that support agriculture," said guest speaker Kam Quarles, CEO of the National Potato Council. "I really enjoy how Idaho does things."

Photos by Sean Ellis

Ririe grain farmer Clark Hamilton, right, received a Lifetime Achievement Award presented by Gov. Brad Little.

During Ag Summit, Governor's Awards for Excellence in Agriculture are awarded.

As usual, five people received the awards this year.

"It's always great to be here," said Gov. Brad Little, a rancher and farmer. "These awards are incredibly important to the state of Idaho."

As Idaho continues to grow rapidly and more newcomers arrive who know little about the state's important agricultural industry, it's important that they hear about the engine that runs the state's economy and way of life, Little said.

"Those of us in agriculture know these people; we know what they've done for our industry," he said about the award recipients. "But these awards highlight to the rest of Idaho all the good things we do in agriculture … This is incredibly important to the state of Idaho."

Ririe grain farmer Clark Hamilton received a Lifetime

"You are blessed here in Idaho to have some fantastic people and organizations that support agriculture. I really enjoy how Idaho does things."

– Kam Quarles, CEO of the National Potato Council

LEFT TO RIGHT: **Rupert barley farmer Mike Wilkins received a Marketing Innovation Award; Bill Meadows of Mountain States Oilseeds was presented with the Technical Innovation Award; Eileen Rowan, a water quality resource conservationist, received the Environmental Stewardship Award. These awards were presented by Gov. Brad Little.**

Achievement Award. He and his wife, Kristi, own and manage a diverse 6,000-acre farm in Bonneville County.

Hamilton spent several years serving and representing Idaho wheat and barley growers as an executive officer of the Idaho Grain Producers Association. He also took leadership roles with U.S. Wheat Associates, which develops, maintains and expands international markets.

According to his award bio, "Clark is passionate about sharing U.S. and Idaho wheat with the world."

"Clark often participates in worldwide wheat marketing conferences and has hosted many international trade teams of buyers, millers, and bakers on his farm in Ririe to promote U.S. and Idaho Wheat," the bio adds. "His insights and collaborative approach have helped identify new opportunities for marketing U.S. wheat and foster stronger connections with overseas customers."

Rupert barley farmer Mike Wilkins received a Marketing Innovation Award.

According to his award bio, his love of agriculture began early while growing up on his family's crop and dairy farm.

"Mike is an outstanding advocate for the Idaho barley industry and Idaho agriculture," his bio states. "Mike has been a champion for barley research in Idaho and nationally."

He has been involved with the National Barley Improvement Committee for more than five years, advocating for federal funds for barley research. He also serves on the Idaho Barley Commission.

"He continually strives to ensure that the best work is being done toward helping Idaho growers," his award bio states. "Mike has also been a positive spokesperson for the commission and Idaho barley industry, giving many interviews to agricultural media during his service."

The Technical Innovation Award was presented to Bill Meadows of Mountain States Oilseeds.

"Mountain State Oilseeds helps Idaho's oilseed growers stay abreast of new technology," his award bio states.

When Meadows began dryland farming in 1973, his operation grew mustard, safflower and flax; he added camelina in 2007.

"Bill has learned that specialty crops can break the disease cycle in dryland farming operations," his bio states.

According to the bio, Meadows Dryland Farming was the

LEFT: **Steve Stuebner was presented with the Michael Parrella Education and Advocacy Award by Gov. Brad Little.** RIGHT: **Kay Riley, center, was presented with the Pat Takasugi Leadership Award by Ag Summit co-chair Cody Reynolds and Suzanne Takasugi.**

first farm in Power County to use strip cropping, moving from traditional wheat fallow rotation to a flexible rotation using less summer fallow.

"The addition of oilseeds in the rotation not only is used to break up disease and pest cycles in wheat, but it allows more land to be cropped each year," his award bio states.

Eileen Rowan was presented the Environmental Stewardship Award. She has been a water quality resource conservationist for the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission since 1997.

"Eileen Rowan's exceptional contributions to environmental conservation and sustainability describe her unwavering dedication to assuring the sustainability of agricultural practices in northcentral Idaho," her award bio states.

"Eileen has played a pivotal role in implementing Total Daily Maximum Load projects across Lewis, Idaho and Clearwater Counties," her award bio states.

She has written and assisted with obtaining more than 76 grants for district projects.

"Her meticulous mapping, profile descriptions and data analysis have provided invaluable insights into soil composition and characteristics," her bio states.

Steve Stuebner was presented with the Michael Parrella Education and Advocacy Award.

"Steve Stuebner is an untiring advocate for practices, projects, and programs that enhance the economic productivity and environmental quality of our state," his award bio states.

Stuebner is an avid outdoor recreationist, experienced journalist and self-described environmentalist. Over many years, his bio states, he has helped the agricultural community by continuing to produce high-quality documentation of the industries that fuel Idaho, Including the livestock industry and its role in Idaho's rangelands.

He has produced nearly 100 in-depth videos covering issues facing ranchers from Bonners Ferry to Preston and everywhere in between. His work has encompassed topics such as wolves, stream restoration, rules of the range for recreation, and more.

"His efforts and connection to healthy, productive grazing operations, as well as his understanding of the needs of many of Idaho's citizens who utilize these rangelands for recreation, has played a vital role in continued efforts to keep Idaho the state we all enjoy," his bio states.

During the summit, Kay Riley was presented with the Pat Takasugi Leadership Award, which is named after the late director of the Idaho State Department of Agriculture and given to someone who has shown strong leadership for Idaho agriculture.

"… it is truly an honor to stand before this group of Idaho agricultural leaders to present an award that carries my late husband Pat's name and the values he believed so strongly in," Suzanne Takasugi said while presenting the award to Riley, who was a business partner with the Takasugis.

Suzanne Takasugi said Riley "is someone whose career, character, and commitment reflect everything the Pat Takasugi Leadership Award represents."

Riley grew up on a family fruit farm in Utah and "what started as a 'couple of weeks' helping us at a packing facility turned into nearly five decades of leadership in the fruit and onion industry across Utah, Oregon and Idaho," Suzanne Takasugi said.

Riley went from managing fruit and onion packing operations to serving as vice president of operations at Muir-Roberts Co., to co-founding Snake River Produce in Nyssa, Ore.

"Kay has consistently stepped forward when leadership was needed," Suzanne Takasugi said. "He helped build businesses, guide ownership transitions, and strengthen the Treasure Valley onion industry for generations to come." ■

Cattle feed efficiency linked to heat stress, grazing behavior

By John O'Connell
University of Idaho

MOSCOW, Idaho – A new University of Idaho-led study explores the scientific reason why some cows spend hot summer days lazing along a shady streambank while others brave the heat and graze the hillsides.

The study suggests cattle that inefficiently convert feed into body mass are more apt to struggle with heat stress while grazing rangeland in hot weather than their efficient counterparts.

Consequently, efficient cattle tracked for the study took fuller advantage of the forage throughout their range, including on steep slopes, during hot days while their inefficient counterparts hunkered in lowlands and were more apt to trample riparian areas.

"There are adaptations that cows take to adapt to their environment, and it's different between the efficient and inefficient cattle," said Jim Sprinkle, a UI Extension beef specialist and principal author of the study. "They adapted their grazing differently, and it's influenced by their physiology."

The researchers conducted the experiment in 2016, closely tracking 12 efficient and 12 inefficient 2-year-old Hereford-Angus cross cows on rangeland at U of I's Rinker Rock Creek Ranch in the Wood River Valley of central Idaho.

They followed the cattle over four days in June and for four more days in August.

Unlike in a feedlot, where ration sizes can be controlled, it's extremely difficult to estimate how much forage cattle consume on rangeland. The team devised a creative method to quantify rangeland grazing — adding a small amount of a marker molecule to the rumen before starting the trial.

The researchers followed each cow and collected its manure throughout the experiment to calculate forage consumption based on the dissipation of the marker in the manure over time.

To validate estimates from their marker-based approach, they conducted the same analysis with cattle given the same marker and fed a known amount of forage in a feed intake monitoring system known as a GrowSafe unit.

Those calculations enabled the researchers to create a table for adjusting forage-consumption estimates obtained from the rangeland trials.

Cattle in the study were classified as efficient or inefficient as yearlings, based on the amount of feed they consumed in a GrowSafe unit.

As expected, inefficient cattle spent more time grazing to meet their nutritional requirements.

"The efficient cows are more purposeful about how they graze. They get in and get it done," Sprinkle said.

In June, when forage was lush and easily digestible, efficient and inefficient cows grazed rugged terrain and slopes. In August, however, efficient cattle continued grazing the hillsides, but inefficient cattle stuck to the lowlands, near shade and water.

Photos courtesy of University of Idaho

Experimental cows graze sagebrush steppe pasture at U of I's Rinker Rock Creek Ranch.

Sprinkle and his colleagues discovered inefficient cows had significantly more undigested forage in their rumen than their efficient counterparts during August grazing, when vegetation was dry and full of less digestible fiber.

The inefficient cows were driven to keep eating to gain adequate nutrition and became overwhelmed by the combination of the summer heat and the heat generated inside of their rumen as forage accumulated.

Based on the study results, Sprinkle advises ranchers who graze on rugged terrain in the summer to consider selecting their replacement heifers with efficiency in mind.

"The majority of ranchers are not going to test their cows. However, you can buy bulls that have been tested for feed efficiency," Sprinkle said. "You could do some selection over time to try to get some of those efficient cattle that presumably would use more of the rugged terrain."

The paper was published in the Dec. 13, 2025, edition of Journal of Animal Science.

Other U of I co-authors of the paper "Forage Intake and Digesta Kinetics of Lactating Beef Cattle Differing in Feed Efficiency While Grazing Idaho Rangelands," include UI Extension Educator Carmen Willmore, Bingham County; John Hall, Extension beef specialist and lead at Rinker Rock Creek Ranch; and Melinda Ellison, Extension specialist in range livestock and sheep.

Co-authors from other institutions include Ronald Lewis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Douglas Tolleson, Texas A&M AgriLife Research-Sonora; and David Jaramillo, with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's U.S. Dairy Forage Research Center in Marshfield, Wisconsin. ■

Photo be Sean Ellis

Idaho has regained its spot as the No. 3 milk state in the nation.

Idaho bumps Texas to reclaim No. 3 milk state

By Sean Ellis
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Idaho has regained the No. 3 spot for total milk production, "moooving" Texas back down to the fourth spot.

In 2024, Texas passed Idaho to become the nation's No. 3 dairy state in terms of total milk production. In 2025, Idaho returned the favor and regained the No. 3 spot, by a sliver.

According to USDA data released Feb. 20, Idaho's 350 dairy operations produced 18.26 billion pounds of milk in 2025. Texas dairies produced 18.21 billion pounds of milk last year. The margin – a little less than 51 million pounds – is equal to about one day's worth of total milk production in Idaho.

In 2024, Texas produced 17.04 billion pounds of milk while Idaho produced 17.02 billion pounds. That difference was equal to about a third of a day's worth of milk production.

In milk production terms, it was the thinnest of margins both years, said Idaho Dairymen's Association Executive Director Rick Naerebout.

"They passed us last year by about a third of one day's production and we passed them back by just shy of one day's production," he said. "It's kind of fun to have this back and forth, but

really, we're not talking big differences between three and four. We're neck in neck."

Before 2024, Idaho had a solid hold on the No. 3 spot for about 15 years since passing New York. Those two states played leapfrog for the No. 3 spot for a few years until Idaho pulled away for good.

Now, it appears Idaho will play leapfrog with Texas.

Naerebout expects the two states to continue vying for the No. 3 spot for a while.

"I think you'll see Idaho and Texas trade back and forth between three and four going forward," he said. "In both states, the industry is in a growth mode; we've both got great environments and great business climates to operate dairy farms in, so I think you're going to see us be neck and neck for a number of years to come."

For the past couple of years, Texas has produced more milk than Idaho during the colder months, while Idaho produces more milk during the warmer months.

"They've got a little bit of a milder winter, so their cows do a little better in the winter than our cows do, and we have a milder summer, so we do better in the summer months," Naerebout said.

California is the nation's No. 1 dairy state and Wisconsin is No. 2. Those states' dairies produced 41 billion pounds and 32.6 billion pounds, respectively, in 2025.

According to estimates by University of Idaho economists, Idaho's dairy operations brought in $3.9 billion in farm-gate receipts in 2025.

There are 19 dairy processing facilities around the state, but the industry is centered in the Magic Valley of southcentral Idaho.

According to a study by U of I agricultural economists, the direct economic impact of the state's dairy industry is $7 billion and the milk sector is responsible for 9,000 jobs directly, both on dairy farms and in the milk processing industry.

When you include the indirect impacts of the industry, the numbers jump to 33,000 jobs and the economic impact is north of $11 billion.

The study also found the state's combined dairy industry was responsible for generating $155 million in state and local taxes, including $61 million in sales tax, $45 million in property tax and $30 million in income tax.

That study was based on data available in 2020 and Idaho's dairy industry has seen significant expansion since then. Add in general inflation and those economic impact numbers are likely much higher now.

According to the U.S. Dairy Export Council, Idaho's dairy industry contributes, directly and indirectly, 5.7 percent to Idaho's total gross domestic product. ■

Justin Place: farming in Eastern Idaho

By Heather Thomas Smith
For Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

HAMER – Justin Place is second generation on his farm near Hamer.

After his father moved there in 1969, "Our family broke out the sagebrush to create the farm; quite a bit of this land was sagebrush and rocks," Place says.

The family raised cattle for a while and grew potatoes for a long time and now just grows malt barley, wheat, alfalfa hay, and mustard.

Place and his wife Tara have four boys but they've all gone into other occupations.

At this point, there isn't another generation coming back to the farm.

The farm's crops have multiple markets.

The malt barley is grown for Anheuser-Busch and is delivered nearby, to Osgood. The wheat is primarily soft white and is sold to Anderson Incorporated in Hamer. The alfalfa hay is sold to a neighbor half a mile away who has about 5000 sheep.

Submitted photos

Justin Place on his second-generation farm in Hamer.

"We've been selling to that neighbor for more than 30 years and I look at it as more of a partnership than a market," Place says. "He needs the hay and I need a market and it works well for both of us."

The mustard is sold to Mountain States Oilseeds in American Falls. "It's a bit of a trucking job to get the mustard seed down there, but it works," Place says.

The farm started growing mustard seed in 2018. "Some years it pays really well and other years not so well, but it helps to have diversity in our crops," Place says. "Some years one crop might do better than the others."

Most of the farms around Hamer do conventional tillage. The Place farm started doing minimum or no-till in 2015.

"Now we are 100% no-till on our operation, except when we get ready to put in a new pivot of hay," Place says. "In these instances we have to work the ground to get it smooth, but it's better for the ground if you don't plow every year."

LEFT: **The Place farm grows a variety of crops including mustard seed, shown here.**

He says the area is excellent farm ground once it is taken out of rocks and sagebrush.

"We've covered a lot of rocks; we bought a couple pan scrapers that pull behind a tractor to cover the rocks and level it up when we created our fields," Place says. "The soil is sandy, however, and wind can blow it around if the ground is disturbed."

He made the decision to no-till after learning more about the Dust Bowl in the 1930s in the Midwest.

"I was sitting in the house during the winter of 2015, and my youngest son and I watched a four-hour, two-part documentary about the Dust Bowl," he says. "I see that happening on a small scale every year in our area when the wind blows and moves the soil around."

The documentary showed photos of sand blowing and covering the fences.

"That was happening here on our farms; every year dirt blows and covers fences," he says. "We stopped tilling and … Our fields rarely blow much; it's minimal if they do…."

Place says soil health has improved in

Wind drifted soil. Place moved to no-tll in 2015 to improve soil health.

"We are often trying things. Some days it might be a big thing and some days just a little thing, but if you are not trying new things it's harder to improve."

– Justin Place, Hamer farmer

the past few years with no-till.

"We use less water because we are not trying to tie the sand down in the spring," he says. "We do use a little more spray to kill the weeds rather than disking them under in the spring, but it's still better this way. Many people frown on using chemicals like weed spray, but you have to balance the benefits and risks."

He says the spray in this situation is definitely the lesser of two evils and enables the farm to use less diesel fuel.

"Doing it this way, we burn less than half the fuel we did in the past," he says.

He says there was a learning curve going to no-till.

"It took us two or three years to get everything dialed in like we wanted," Place says. "People say your crops don't yield as much per acre and your yields go down with no-till. We found that to be true the first couple years as we were trying to figure out what we needed to do and how best to handle it, but now we are producing the same or more, and our ground is healthier."

He says people brag about how many bushels of grain they produce per acre, but nobody talks about the cost per bushel — in water, fertilizer, etc. — to grow that much grain, or the long-term toll it might take on the land.

"I might have grown 5 to 10 bushels less per acre those first years, but I gained it back and made just as much money because I didn't spend as much doing all the tillage, etc.," he says. "I was making just as much money as before, and now that we have the soil healthier and things are doing well, we are producing the same crop or more per acre, with less cost."

He says agriculture markets run in cycles and sometimes times are tough, but you have to make sure you don't get depressed in the bad years.

"You just have to ride out the storms and watch your input costs and save where you can save," Place says.

Yet you still have to produce a crop.

"When times get tough, some people decide to cut back on fertilizer, but I feel we still need to produce a crop," he says. "We continue to put the things into it that we need but don't get as crazy about trying this or that or something fancy."

You just continue doing the things you know will work, he says.

"We are often trying things," he says. "Some days it might be a big thing and some days just a little thing, but if you are not trying new things it's harder to improve."

Over the long haul, he says, you find things that can improve or fine-tune your operation.

Place says farmers and ranchers are the world's greatest optimists.

"You have to love what you do," he says. "When times get tough, I start looking at what I need to do to feel good about things again."

For him, that might include going for a drive in a side-by-side in the evening when it's cool and the sun is going down in a beautiful setting over the crops.

"Living where we live, we have to realize that the world comes here for vacations because they want to see the beauty of nature," he says. "We have beautiful mountains, beautiful sunsets and sunrise over the crops, and I just soak that up and remember the good times. Things might be tough in the ag world, but the tough times won't last forever."

Farmers and ranchers are feeding people, he says, "and we have a responsibility to keep going."

Place also tries to be a spokesman for agriculture. He just finished serving on the executive board of the Idaho Grain Producers Association and was recently appointed to the Idaho Wheat Commission.

"We have to tell our stories and help people understand the importance of agriculture," he says. ■

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Episode 105 - SPUD Crypto

Many people mistakenly think that cryptocurrency is just bitcoin. Actually, there are many different types of cryptocurrency. One recently developed is SPUD, a meme coin built for the agricultural community. SPUD was created by Cody Holm, 5th generation farmer from Southeast Idaho.

Cody knows there are skeptics about crypto. In this episode he takes the opportunity to address misconceptions and shares where he hopes it will go in the future.