

COALITION SEEKS TO RESCUE U.S. SHEEP EXPERIMENT STATION FROM CLOSURE

For years the U.S. Sheep Station in Dubois, Idaho has been at the forefront of conducting peer-reviewed research on rangelands, livestock, and sagebrush ecosystems. Over the past few years though, there have been attempts to eliminate funding for the Station.

Supporters believe that would be a fatal blow to ongoing efforts to balance the interests of the physical and human environments in the West. They contend that the Station not only addresses critical food security and wildlife habitat issues, but consistently applies sound science to understand issues including the symbiotic relationship between managed grazing, fire suppression, and healthy populations of sage grouse.

We couldn't agree more.

By Steve Stuebner

A coalition of Idaho agricultural interests and the American Sheep Industry Association are backing a new proposal that would seek to rescue the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station in Dubois from federal closure this year and reposition it for the future.

With the Idaho Legislature recently earmarking \$200,000 as ongoing seed money for the facility, that should increase the possibilities of keeping the station open, said J. Bret Taylor, director of the sheep station. "Politically, it speaks volumes," Taylor says. "It's huge."

State Sen. Steve Bair, R-Blackfoot, a member of the Legislature's Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee (JFAC), helped lead the effort to provide an ongoing level of fi-



Sheep grazing at the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station. Photo: courtesy of S. Cox

ancial support from the state.

"It tells them that the state of Idaho thinks it's important and is willing to put some skin in the game on this thing," Stan Boyd, executive director of the Idaho Wool Growers Association, told Capital Press. "It's a perfect place to conduct research for the sheep industry. It's a real asset and it would be a real shame to lose that station."

The Idaho Legislature will steer the funds to the University of Idaho's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. The money will fund two research positions at the station. JFAC voted to approve the funds unanimously.

The new coalition, called the "Western Integrated Rangeland Research Consortium," includes partners such as the University of Idaho, Idaho Cattle Association, Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission, Idaho Wool Growers, American Sheep Industry,

Washington State University, Utah State University, University of Wyoming and Montana State University. The coalition partners would broaden the scope and diversify the research conducted at the station.

The sheep station operates on 48,000 acres of federal land in the remote, northeastern corner of Idaho. The station is nearly a century old. Eighteen-hundred sheep are housed there for research. The location of the station lies in a high-elevation rangeland setting near the Continental Divide and the neighboring states of Wyoming and Montana. Several different plant ecotypes exist in the region.

"I think there's tremendous opportunities for research out there," says Wyatt Prescott, executive vice president of the Idaho Cattle Association. "There's nearly a century of data that has yet to be mined. If the facility

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is focused in the direction that we're suggesting, there are endless possibilities of what we could do. We need to grow it!"

Prescott was heading to Washington D.C. this week to discuss a number of issues with Obama administration officials, and the sheep station will be one of them, he said.

Backers of saving the experiment station are working with Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, in particular because of his position on the House Appropriations Committee. U.S. Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch also are supportive.

The challenge is that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has proposed a zero budget for the sheep station for fiscal 2016, and the USDA's Agriculture Research Service has been closing its labs across the country.

Once a research facility is proposed for closure, local interests typically rally to try to save it, much like local political leaders might do to save a military base. "It's up to the stakeholders to work with their congressional people at the national level to get it reversed," Taylor said.

One of key values that stakeholders see at the sheep experiment station is the robust nature of the sage grouse habitat and sage grouse populations that exist there. The



Sage grouse in flight, photo: courtesy of Duboise Sage Grouse Days.

station has 17 identified leks on the property, and the sage grouse populations are strong in the Upper Snake region, with a range of 1,200-1,500 males counted on lek routes for that area, by far the strongest populations in the state.

"We've been monitoring the sage grouse populations since the late 1960s and early 1970s," Taylor said. "We have some of the oldest sage grouse data that exists. We don't allow hunting. Our habitat is robust and extremely strong, and our populations are doing well."

The Dubois community is gearing up for their annual "Grouse Days" Festival on April 11. See www.grouse.org or the group's Facebook page "Dubois Grouse Days" for more information. They offer lek tours, photography blinds, excellent food and more during the one-day event.

"One of the big values I see is the opportunity to conduct scientific research on the interactions of livestock with important wildlife species such as sage grouse," says Gretchen Hyde, executive director of the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission. "The things we learn from research on grazing management could be transferred to public lands management. There are very few locations where this can be done

in the West due to federal regulations and limitations.

"The more we know, the better we can manage to improve habitat and rangeland conditions. This is important to both the livestock industry in Idaho and the wildlife species that reside on rangelands across the West."

As an example, Taylor noted that the sheep station has monitored the impacts of sheep grazing on grizzly bears in the area, and the grizzly bear populations have increased over time without showing any negative impacts. "That's the story we have," he said.

Soil and water conservation districts are hopeful that more research projects could occur at the sheep station to benefit local ranchers and farmers. The Idaho Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts in Division 6 recently held a meeting to learn about future opportunities at the sheep station.

"We're hopeful," said Robbie Taylor, district manager of the Clark County Soil Conservation District and the Madison Soil and Water Conservation District. "It's nice to see the Idaho Legislature step up. That's a start."

Robbie Taylor notes that the Clark County



Photo: courtesy of B. Taylor

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commissioners are supportive of keeping the sheep station open as it is the second-largest employer in the county. “We think they do a really good job with their research projects, and their research is a real benefit to the local schools, the FFA students, colleges and universities.”

Students from all of those educational levels frequently participate in tours at the sheep station to learn about the impacts of fire on rangelands, grazing systems and interactions between livestock and wildlife, he said.

The Clark Soil Conservation District is partnering with the Sage Grouse Initiative and Pheasants Forever to assist the sheep station in placing fluorescent fence-markers on the top of barbed-wire fences this year to prevent sage grouse from striking the top wire of the fences. That project is expected to occur this spring and summer. The Clark district contributed \$1,000 to the project, and the sheep station has kicked in some funds as well.

“The Sage Grouse Days people are contributing to this and the local high schools will provide the manpower,” Robbie Clark says.

More research and education are recommended by the consortium to do the following:

- Evaluate how climate change affects fire mitigation strategies, invasive species management, rangeland and wildlife productivity.
- Continue research on livestock production and profitability including animal nutrition, invasive species and infectious diseases.
- Discovery, characterization and the use of genomics data to improve food animal production in the midst of climate change across alternative landscapes, production systems and disease challenges.
- Educational opportunities for veterinary internships, student internships



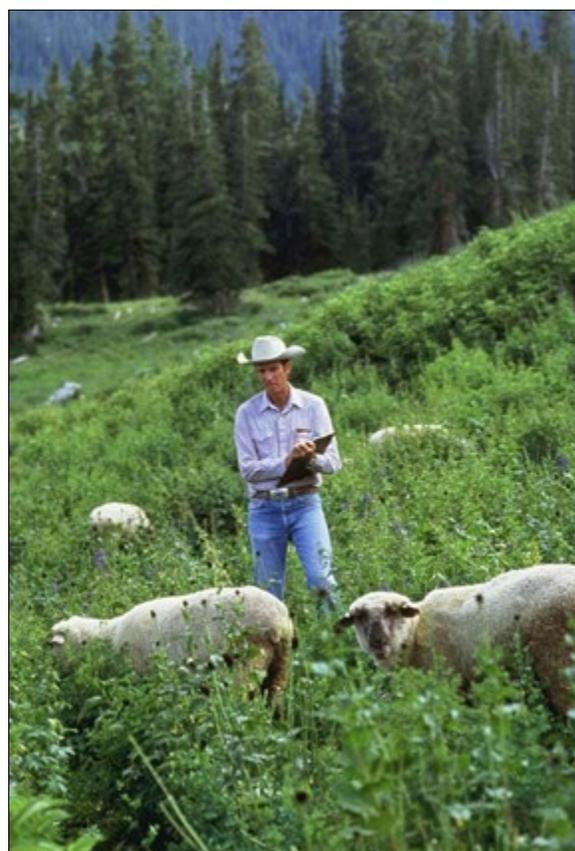
Photo: courtesy of B. Taylor

from other disciplines and training for industry producers and natural resource professionals.

“The Consortium model would utilize the (sheep station) as a large, nationally unique field laboratory to add value and management application to research efforts at other USDA-ARS facilities and improve recruitment and retention efforts by co-locating scientists in larger research communities,” a position paper by the consortium says.

But in the meantime, a strong effort is needed by advocates to keep the station open and fully funded, officials said.

“I think if enough people voice their opinion, I think we can keep it open,” Robbie Taylor said. □



Range monitoring in the Sheep Station high country. Photo: courtesy of B. Taylor

COMMISSION & PARTNER UPDATES

IASCD Spring 2015 Division meetings just wrapped up with the Division 1 meeting held in beautiful Dover, Idaho. Thanks to all of our partners. Your hospitality, attentiveness, questions, and input are greatly appreciated. And for the first time in recent history, partners traveled to Division 1 and 2 together (see photo at right).

Administrator Teri Murrison recently participated in Governor Butch Otter's Heyburn Capitol for a Day. She and various cabinet officials spoke to issues including water, agriculture, energy, species conservation, education, and more. Thanks to Governor Otter for the invitation to

participate.

Josh Uriarte is a new project manager with the Office of Species Conservation (OSC). His primary responsibilities for OSC include providing technical support and coordinating with federal, state and private partners on sage-grouse recovery in Idaho. Josh and Delwyne Trefz are working with districts to create opportunities to get involved in management activities.



Partners at rest from left to right: Commissioner Leon Slichter, Delwyne Trefz and Bill Lillibridge (Commission), Benjamin Kelly (IASCD), and Travis Thomason (NRCS).

NRCS Chief Weller announced Curtis Elke has been selected as the new Idaho State Conservationist. He currently works for NRCS in South Dakota and will start in Idaho on May 4th. We look forward to meeting and working with him.

Goodbye (but not so-long) to Acting State Conservationist Travis Thomason from Utah. We greatly appreciate his heart for voluntary conservation, districts, and Idaho. Please don't be a stranger, Travis.

Congrats to the Bear Lake District on their 75th anniversary!

Congrats to Northside District for completing planning on the Wilson Lake Erosion Prevention and Recreation Improvement Project. Improvements include replacing retaining structures, construction of a boat ramp and boat dock. North Side is also working with partners

to update the Hazelton City Park and fields with a modern conservation-friendly water system for the recreational facility. The Project will use filtered canal water, pumps, and sprinklers.

If districts have news to share, please let us know by the 15th of each month (carolyn.watts@swc.idaho.gov). □



Director Spackman, ID Water Resources responds to a question on water calls as the Governor, Lt. Governor Little, and Dept. of Ag Director Gould listen at the Governor's Capitol for the Day in Heyburn.

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650 West State Street, Room 145 • Boise Idaho 83702 • P: 208-332-1790
F: 208-332-1799 • info@swc.idaho.gov • swc.idaho.gov

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