

FY 2014-2017 Strategic Plan

Celebrating Our 75th Year of Conservation the Idaho Way



Photo courtesy of Jeff Eickhoff



SOIL & WATER
CONSERVATION COMMISSION

established
1939

*Conservation the Idaho Way:
Sowing seeds of Stewardship*

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MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

We look forward to the 75th anniversary of the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission with great excitement on achieving this significant milestone.



As we look back, we acknowledge and remember all the people and partnerships - notably with local conservation districts and the Natural Resources Conservation Service - that we forged to accomplish the impossible. These partnerships have allowed us to create and perpetuate wonderful programs benefitting our most valuable natural resources in Idaho: the land, water and air. Without protecting and preserving these, there will be no tomorrow for future generations.

Our next 75 years can be even more exciting. We learned from the past how to protect our future. Did we make errors in the past? Certainly. But sometimes we have to take chances and think outside the box or we'll never make progress. How do we know they are errors until we try them? Will we make errors in the future? Maybe, but someone told me once that those are correctable errors. No, we cannot stand still, for if we do then we are going backwards.

So I challenge all of us to think ahead to our future, and not to dwell on past achievements or past mistakes. We need to put all our resources together to look forward to where we're going. Let our past be just that. Let's work together in Idaho's oldest conservation movement and see a brighter future for all Idahoans.

H. Norman Wright, Chairman

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Water Quality Field Training, Jump Creek, May 2013

INTRODUCTION: CONSERVATION THE IDAHO WAY

Idaho is endowed with a magnificent blend of diverse natural landscapes – rivers, lakes, mountains, forests and desert canyons – combined with rich and fertile agricultural lands well-suited for growing a wide variety of crops and raising livestock.

People who work in Idaho agriculture have deep roots in the land. We know that caring for the land will reap benefits for future generations. We are convinced that the best way to care for and enhance our soil, water, air, plants and wildlife is through voluntary, locally led efforts. Our guiding philosophy is to use the state's natural resources to benefit Idahoans while maintaining and improving those resources for future generations.

The Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission (Conservation Commission) focuses on Conservation the Idaho Way: voluntary

stewardship, not regulatory mandates. No Idahoan is required to do conservation projects. Instead, we incentivize responsible stewardship by providing cost sharing and technical expertise. Proactive, non-regulatory projects are beneficial because they address issues of concern and help avoid costly lawsuits and onerous regulations.

Conservation the Idaho way is locally led. In 1939 the Legislature established a bottom-up approach to voluntary conservation and today local people still lead local efforts. The Conservation Commission and our partners - local soil and water conservation districts (districts), the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and others - combine efforts to assist farmers and ranchers engaged in voluntary stewardship activities. Together we are the heartbeat of voluntary

conservation and partners in Idaho's oldest conservation movement.

The Conservation Commission was created as a state agency in 1939 during the Dust Bowl era to address significant soil erosion issues -- sheet erosion, wind erosion and severe gully. A 1934 soil erosion survey in Idaho revealed that more than 27 million acres of land, or roughly half the state, had serious soil erosion problems.

The state's first order of business was to help form soil conservation districts at the county level. Farmers and ranchers were elected directors of the districts, providing leadership on project priorities. As districts formed, NRCS and the Conservation Commission provided technical assistance to assist with stewardship projects.

Today there are 50 local soil and water conservation districts located from Bonners Ferry to Montpelier. Their efforts are guided by 5-year plans containing conservation goals and prioritized projects and activities. We provide funding and technical staff to empower districts - the boots on the ground - to get things done.

The Idaho Legislature has appropriated \$2.7 million to the Conservation Commission in FY 2014 (in general and dedicated funds) to support voluntary conservation in Idaho, \$1.1

million of which goes directly to districts for projects and operations. Because we're committed to being good stewards of public funds, we all work to wring every last drop of conservation from every dollar invested.

In addition, we provide other incentive programs and technical assistance to promote and support Conservation the Idaho Way. With a small staff of 16 full time employees located around the state, we work with the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality to create voluntary Agricultural and Grazing Implementation Plans on Idaho's 303(d) listed waterways. Our plans integrate the use of a variety of best management practices to reduce pollutant loads and safeguard water quality.

While we began working 75 years ago to reduce soil erosion, our efforts now include soil, water, plants, air, and animal conservation activities, as well.

This FY2014-2017 Strategic Plan provides the Conservation Commission, our partners, the Legislature, Governor, and the public with a detailed roadmap for sowing seeds of stewardship across this great State of Idaho.

Teri Murrison, Administrator

"Take care of the land and the land will take care of you."

Hugh Bennett
Soil Conservation Service

KEY EXTERNAL FACTORS

There are key external factors that could affect the agency's ability to meet goals and objectives. They include:

- State and federal regulatory pressure and mandates that could shift priorities and resources away from current activities.
- Changing economics of agriculture, which could result in significant increases or decreases in conservation program participation.
- Changing economics of state and federal budgets, which could result in additional agency cuts or fewer conservation dollars being spent in the state.

**Conservation the Idaho Way:
*sowing seeds of stewardship***

MISSION

To facilitate coordinated non-regulatory, voluntary, and locally-led conservation by federal, state, and local governments including Idaho's conservation districts and other partners to conserve, sustain, improve, and enhance soil, water, air, plant, and animal resources.

VISION

Conservation in Idaho reflects locally-led natural resource conservation leadership and priorities, is voluntary and incentive-based, non-regulatory, and demonstrates scientifically sound stewardship. The Conservation Commission and local conservation districts are the primary entities to lead coordinated conservation efforts to provide landowners and land-users with assistance and solutions for natural resource concerns and issues.

PHILOSOPHY

The Conservation Commission is dedicated to guiding principles for each goal and related activity.

- Satisfy legislative intent and statute
 - Benefit the environment and Idaho's agricultural-based economy
 - Benefit conservation districts' locally led, voluntary, non-regulatory priorities and projects
 - Benefit the Commission's ability to serve
 - Promote fiscal responsibility
 - Strengthen existing and build new conservation partnerships
 - Incorporate valid scientific data and practices
-

PLAN GOALS & OBJECTIVES

GOAL #1: PROMOTE VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION BY PROVIDING TECHNICAL AND OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES TO IDAHO CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

The Conservation Commission provides leadership and assistance to local conservation districts as established in Title 22 Chapter 27, Idaho Code.

OBJECTIVE # 1.1: TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO DISTRICTS.

Allocate available technical staff time to provide specific and other technical assistance to districts as resources permit – technical services also include some current and future grant and project obligations consistent with Conservation Commission priorities and objectives. Support services may include:

Specialized Technical Assistance is defined as: That technical assistance used to support districts in the wise use and enhancement of natural resources which can only be provided by someone possessing a specialized, science-based skill set and an ability to integrate local knowledge of the site-specific interactions between environmental, economic, cultural and social concerns into the assistance provided.

Examples of Specialized Technical Assistance may include but are not limited to:

- Conservation planning
- Engineering services
- Project implementation and construction inspections
- BMP effectiveness monitoring
- Watershed planning and riparian assessments

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Provide technical assistance and engineering services as capacity and resources allow.
 - Benchmark: Annually inventory and award available field staff hours to provide technical and engineering assistance based on ranking criteria adopted by Conservation Commission to assist districts with new and existing projects and maximize number of landowners served.
 - Benchmark: Maintain field staff presence at district Board meetings as resources allow.
- Conduct Conservation Commission, district, region, IASCD, and partner technical assistance needs assessment and capacity inventories.
 - Benchmark: Oversee planning for Conservation Commission staffing, preparation of annual agency work plan, maintain technical assistance capacity inventory.
- Convene ad hoc stakeholder workgroup(s) to rank and recommend provision of technical assistance to districts.
 - Benchmark: Utilize workgroup(s) to annually compile list of recommended ranked and prioritized district requests for technical assistance.

- Benchmark: Document provision of district technical assistance in annual performance measures report.

OBJECTIVE # 1.2: STATE FUNDING ALLOCATIONS TO DISTRICTS.

Distribute district allocations pursuant to Idaho Code 22-2727 and IDAPA 60.05.04 Rules for Allocation of Funds to Conservation Districts (annually).

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Distribute base allocations to districts in compliance with reporting requirements set forth in IDAPA 60.05.04.
 - Benchmark: Distribute base allocations by July 31st of each year.
- Convene workgroup annually to review Financial & Match Reports and make recommendation to Conservation Commission.
 - Benchmark: Consider recommendations for district allocations from workgroup by October 1st annually.
- Distribute match allocations to districts in compliance with reporting requirements set forth in IDAPA 60.05.04.
 - Benchmark: Distribute 90% of match allocations no later than November 30th annually. Distribute remaining 10% by April 1st annually.
- Provide assistance to districts to support the development and submission of materials required under IDAPA 60.05.04.
 - Benchmark: As needed, assist with or provide training to districts.

OBJECTIVE # 1.3: COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES TO DISTRICTS.

Assist and provide services that encourage capacity development to independently and collectively strengthen districts.

Comprehensive District Assistance is defined as:

That assistance which supports the independent and collective strengthening of conservation districts by: a) providing services which expand resources or otherwise enhance district capacity to assist private landowners and land users in the conservation, sustainment, improvement and enhancement of Idaho's natural resources, or; b) providing assistance required to support routine district activities or projects.

Examples of comprehensive assistance MAY include but are not limited to:

- District information and outreach activities
- Administration of district-sponsored cost-share programs
- Development of a district needs assessment
- Grant writing assistance
- Development of 5-year and annual work plans

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Identify and document unmet needs for funding water quality improvement projects related to listed waterbodies as identified and prioritized in 5-year and other district plans.
 - Benchmark: Conduct district budget hearing by June 15th annually.
- Provide capacity building services and/or funding to districts as resources allow.
 - Benchmark: If funds are available, by June 15th of each year solicit district requests for funding for capacity building activities.

GOAL #2: PROMOTE VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION BY PROVIDING VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

OBJECTIVE # 2.1: INCENTIVE PROGRAMS

Support non-regulatory, science-based conservation incentive programs to accelerate the development of voluntary projects and practices throughout the state.

2.1.1 RESOURCE CONSERVATION & RANGELAND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM (RCRDP).

Administer low interest conservation loan program promoting increased conservation benefits to agricultural, woodlands, and rangelands within the state and provide financial assistance to eligible applicants for the implementation of resource management projects.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Administer and further develop the loan program to meet statewide conservation efforts.
 - Benchmark: Maintain or improve annual levels of funding.
- Monitor and evaluate loan policies on ongoing basis to ensure continued accountability and recommend improvements, if necessary.
 - Benchmark: Evaluate existing and new loan policies annually (RCRDP Loan Committee) and make recommendations to Board.
- Monitor timeliness of loan review process as established by Conservation Commission.
 - Benchmark: Conduct bi-annual tracking of two loan applications and report results to Conservation Commission.
- Promote RCRDP program.
 - Benchmark: Develop and update marketing plan annually.
 - Benchmark: Provide regular training to all field staff and districts as identified in Marketing Plan.

2.1.2 STATE REVOLVING FUND

Upon request, assist the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) with their water quality loan program addressing non-point source pollution.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Administer existing and/or future loans.
 - Benchmark: Service and track one loan.
- Determine potential to administer additional loans under SRF.
 - Benchmark: Report to Conservation Commission on potential for future program funding, and pursue if appropriate.

2.1.3 WATER QUALITY PROGRAM FOR AGRICULTURE (WQPA)

Actively pursue funding opportunities as identified.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Evaluate future funding and operation and actively pursue, if appropriate.
 - Benchmark: Report on potential for future program funding, and pursue if appropriate.

2.1.4 CONSERVATION IMPROVEMENT GRANTS.

This currently unfunded program has financed conservation projects in the past by providing cost sharing for the installation of conservation practices. Evaluate feasibility of continuing program.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Evaluate future funding and operation and actively pursue, if appropriate.
 - Benchmark: Report to Conservation Commission on potential for future funding and operation and actively pursue, if appropriate.

2.1.5 WORKING LANDSCAPES CONSERVATION PROGRAM

Evaluate feasibility of outcomes-based program as an alternative to regulations/permanent conservation easements and that provides incentives for landowners to improve water quality, and conserve working landscapes, and other beneficial uses of lands and natural resources.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Evaluate feasibility of establishing a Working Landscapes Conservation Program.
 - Benchmark: Report on status of similar projects and identify possible funding sources.

OBJECTIVE # 2.2: CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

Provide policy and program mechanisms that enhance the environmental quality and economic productivity of the state.

2.2.1 CONSERVATION RESERVE ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM (CREP).

Provide technical leadership and oversight to improve water quantity and quality, enhance wildlife habitat, reduce ground water use, and decrease agriculture-related chemical and sediment runoff to the waters of the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Serve as lead agency for statewide CREP program.
 - Benchmark: Continue working to achieve goals and objectives for the CREP program as outlined in the 2006 agreement with the USDA Farm Service Agency.
 - Benchmark: Continue working to achieve increased program goals as outlined in CREP 2011 annual report
 - Benchmark: Update agency's CREP goals and create implementation plan
 - Benchmark: Investigate feasibility of enhancing Idaho OnePlan for interagency CREP data sharing and reporting.
 - Benchmark: Submit annual report to Farm Service Agency and other partners.
 - Benchmark: Conduct annual leadership and regular interagency meetings.

2.2.2 TOTAL MAXIMUM DAILY LOAD (TMDL) IMPLEMENTATION PLANNING.

Lead efforts to address agricultural and grazing components of TMDL Implementation Plan development for water quality impaired surface waters in the state.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- In coordination with the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), complete existing TMDL Agricultural Implementation Plans, initiate new plans or addendums, and assist with five-year reviews on existing DEQ Sub-basin Assessment (SBA) TMDLs.
 - Benchmark: Complete TMDL Agricultural Implementation Plans within 18 months of TMDL approval.
 - Benchmark: Provide technical assistance to districts with demonstrated need for implementation of BMPs outlined in TMDL agricultural implementation plans, as resources allow.
 - Benchmark: Support partner priorities and funding initiatives as resources allow.
 - Benchmark: Conduct annual meetings with six DEQ regional offices to coordinate TMDL activities.

2.2.3 IDAHO GROUND WATER QUALITY PLAN.

Facilitate cooperative ground water protection programs in conjunction with other state agencies pursuant to a 2008 Interagency Cooperative Agreement. Promote and support implementation of water quality projects across the state to maintain and enhance ground water quality.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Assist districts with demonstrated need in planning and implementation efforts in Nitrate Priority Areas to reduce nitrate contamination, as resources allow.

- Benchmark: Conduct planning and implementation to meet responsibilities as outlined in the Cooperative Agreement and in coordination with the Idaho Agricultural Pollution Abatement Plan.
- Benchmark: Deliver annual reports to Board on progress.

2.2.4 IDAHO AGRICULTURAL POLLUTION ABATEMENT PLAN.

Lead effort to update and maintain guidance document in support of control and abatement of agricultural non-point source pollution.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Update (every ten years) and maintain guidance documents in support of the control and abatement of agricultural non-point source pollution as resources allow.
 - Benchmark: Secure funding and support to update the Agricultural Pollution Abatement Plan.
 - Benchmark: Provide training to staff on BMP Effectiveness Guide.
 - Benchmark: Convene BMP working group as needed.

2.2.5 IDAHO ONEPLAN.

Provide for the establishment and enhancement of Idaho OnePlan as a primary computer-based conservation planning process and repository for natural resource concerns.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Encourage and promote the use of OnePlan within Idaho.
 - Benchmark: Conduct annual Executive Committee meeting
- Search for funding to create online enhancements.
 - Benchmark: Report to OnePlan Executive Committee and Conservation Commission Board on potential for enhancements, ongoing funding, and operation.
 - Benchmark: Evaluate timing and consider update to statute for specific requirements for steering committee, etc. and ensure flexibility for continued participation and funding.

2.2.6 CARBON SEQUESTRATION.

Under Idaho statute, Conservation Commission is the lead agency for a currently inactive program related to carbon sequestration and greenhouse emission reductions associated with agricultural and forestry practices, management systems, and land uses occurring on cropland, forest land, and rangeland in Idaho.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Seek to identify potential funding sources.
 - Benchmark: Monitor ongoing carbon issues and determine feasibility of and funding for re-activating program.

- Benchmark: Evaluate and consider proposing changes to Idaho Code to delete specific requirements for committee meetings and membership or reconvene planning group upon securing funding for program.

2.2.7 WATERSHED IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS.

Oversee the creation and discontinuance of watershed improvement districts throughout the state.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Oversee creation and discontinuance of watershed improvement districts as provided for in statute.
 - Benchmark: As necessary, perform duties specified in statute for formation and dissolution of districts.

GOAL #3: INFORM AND EDUCATE STAKEHOLDERS, BUILDING SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION AND SWCC

Inform partners, local, state and federal agency officials and others about the Conservation Commission’s mission. Develop beneficial intergovernmental and other relationships to maximize resources, funding, and streamline conservation delivery that is consistent with locally led, voluntary, and non-regulatory conservation plans and policies and harmonizes with regulatory efforts in an effort to meet statewide conservation goals. Educate local, state, and federal officials about Conservation Commission and partner efforts.

OBJECTIVE 3.1 PARTNER PARTICIPATION

Engage districts and other partners in programs and activities. Seek to expand involvement in consideration and decision making. Disseminate information about services and activities of the Conservation Commission, encourage and increase district and public knowledge and participation in activities and processes.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Increase Conservation Commission transparency through greater access.
 - Benchmark: Post online agendas, supporting documentation, and meeting minutes for Conservation Commission meetings
 - Benchmark: Where feasible, utilize live online video streaming and interactive stakeholder participation to increase district and public participation in meetings and processes.
- Disseminate information to encourage partner participation in planning processes.
 - Benchmark: Distribute meeting and activities announcements to our audience using Commission website, distribution lists, and social media accounts.

OBJECTIVE 3.2 INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Inform and educate the public, partners, and others on Conservation Commission activities. Work with IASCD and the districts to publicize the successes of locally led voluntary, non-regulatory conservation efforts in Idaho.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Update Legislature and Executive Branch
 - Benchmark: Deliver annual reports to legislature germane committees, JFAC.
 - Benchmark: Deliver annual reports (performance measurements, etc.) to Governor
- Develop strategy for educating the public and other stakeholders about Conservation Commission activities.
 - Benchmark: Promote voluntary conservation during Conservation Commission's 75th Anniversary Year via monthly newsletters.
 - Benchmark: Conduct annual district and partner survey.
 - Benchmark: Maintain frequently updated Facebook pages and posts on Twitter.
- Facilitate flow of information and communication with staff.
 - Benchmark: Distribute monthly activities summary/talking points to staff.
 - Benchmark: Hold annual All Staff meeting and trainings.

OBJECTIVE 3.3 INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

Facilitate non-regulatory, voluntary, and locally-led conservation activities by and between local, state, and federal governments.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Work with partners
 - Benchmark: Identify potential new partnerships and resources.
 - Benchmark: Coordinate with NRCS State Engineer on approval authority issues; propose changes to Standards and Specifications.
 - Benchmark: Work with other state agencies regarding technical assistance and engineering on TMDLs, WQPA, RCRDP, Ground Water Priority Areas, etc.
- Review federal, state, and local policies that are determined to impact the Conservation Commission and/or districts; review proposed and adopted plans, programs, environmental documents, activities and initiatives affecting conservation efforts.
 - Benchmark: Convene advisory group as needed.
 - Benchmark: Develop policies as needed.

OBJECTIVE 3.4 COLLABORATION

Collaborate with stakeholders to conserve, sustain, improve, and enhance Idaho's private and public lands.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Collaborate with stakeholders including the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts (IASCD), the Idaho District Employees Association (IDEA) to advance on the ground conservation in Idaho.
 - Benchmark: Attend IASCD meetings including: annual conference, spring and fall division meetings, and Board meetings, as requested.
 - Benchmark: Conduct annual district listening session to solicit input from partners.

- Collaborate with IDEA to advance and promote district employee training opportunities.
 - Benchmark: Assist IDEA with employee training opportunities, as requested.
- Collaborate with resource and agricultural production groups to disseminate information on Conservation Commission activities and conservation planning and implementation activities.
 - Benchmark: Attend other association meetings including Food Producers meetings weekly during legislative session.
 - Benchmark: Participate in natural resource groups and processes to focus attention on the roles, policies, and plans of the Conservation Commission and districts to attract partners and resources.
 - Benchmark: Attend Environmental Forum and other similar meetings monthly.
- Participate in, speak at, and attend field trips and tours, annual conferences, attend meetings, conferences, and other functions to represent the Conservation Commission and promote good stewardship of Idaho's natural resources.
 - Benchmark: Attend events as appropriate and present as requested.



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Sowing seeds of Stewardship*

C. L. "Butch" Otter, Governor

H. Norman Wright, Chair
Roger Stutzman, Vice Chair
Gerald Trebesch, Secretary
David Radford, Member
Dick Bronson, Member

Teri Murrison, Administrator

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