

## ELKE ENTERS IDAHO EXPERIENCED & COMMITTED TO COLLABORATION, PARTNERSHIP

*Since the retirement of former State Conservationist Jeff Burwell, inquiring minds have wondered who would next guide NRCS in Idaho. Wonder no more, Curtis Elke is the man, and it appears he's a good match.*

*Elke has experience in many of our issues and initiatives - soil health, for example. He also brings unique qualifications: aquaculture, for one. He's balanced agricultural and environmental interests from North Dakota to Massachusetts, back to South Dakota, and soon will here.*

*He's committed to building relationships with traditional partners - the Commission and local conservation districts - and new ones too. And he's every bit as amiable as you'd think a former no-till drill salesman should be. Welcome, Curtis! - Ed*

By Steve Stuebner

Curtis Elke is ready to roll up his sleeves and get to work in Idaho as the new State Conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). His start date is May 4th.

"I'm coming into this position with an open mind and open ears," Elke said in a telephone interview from his NRCS field support office in Brookings, S.D., where he has served as the Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations in the last six years. "I'm really excited to work together with the Idaho NRCS team and partners helping make a positive difference in Idaho."

"I feel extremely fortunate that NRCS Idaho

has had exceptional past leadership. I'm ready to take the baton and build on that past success by serving with the NRCS Idaho team."

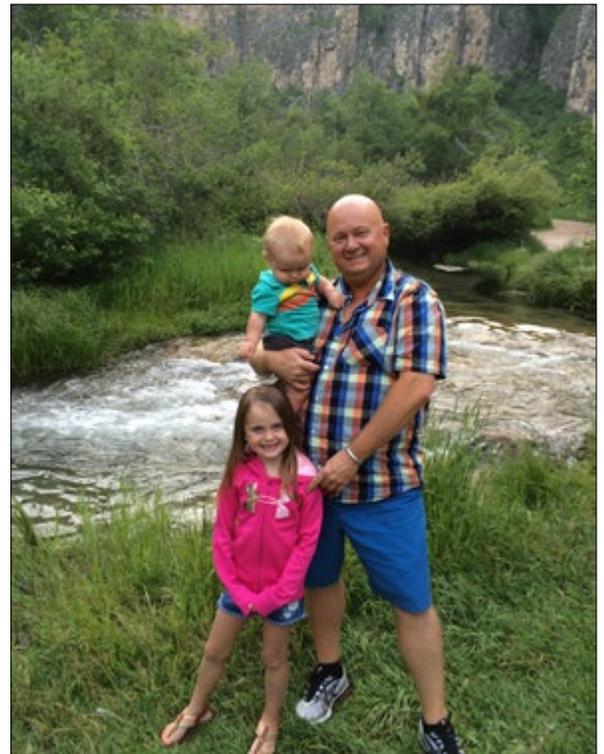
Although Elke is new to Idaho, he is not new to agriculture, forestry, wildlife habitat and environmental importance. He's an active outdoorsman, golfer, angler, hiker and naturalist. Elke has two children, a son and a daughter who both work for NRCS, as well.

"I never tried to persuade them in their career choices," he says. "However they saw how well NRCS has taken care of their father and how much I enjoy my occupation of helping people help the land."

The NRCS in Idaho is an important player in a four-way partnership between the Conservation Commission, local soil and water conservation districts and landowners. Cooperative projects often involve three or four of the partners working together to achieve "boots-on-the-ground" conservation. The NRCS team also tracks mountain snowpack and predicts streamflow and irrigation water supplies for farmers, ranchers, recreationists and the general public.

The NRCS Idaho has multiple conservation programs that provide tens of millions in cost-share funds for water conservation, water quality improvements, soil health, conservation easements, protecting riparian areas, improving wildlife habitat and forestry projects statewide. The NRCS also strives for excellent customer service by providing excellent and thorough conservation planning for the landowner/producer.

Benjamin Kelly, executive director of the Idaho Association of Soil and Water Con-



*Elke looks forward to introducing his grandchildren to Idaho.*

servation Districts, said the IASCD board is pleased with the selection of Elke as State Conservationist. "It's very encouraging to us, especially his experience in agriculture. South Dakota is a good place to come from because there are a lot of similar issues."

After the State Conservationist position came open upon Jeff Burwell's retirement last year, Benjamin said the IASCD board met with Aster Boozer, western regional conservationist for NRCS, based in Washington D.C., to impress upon him the importance of hiring a person who had knowledge of western agriculture, particularly water and drought issues, federal land use issues and forestry issues.

"I think Elke will have pretty good knowledge of these issues from his previous experience," Kelly said.

Elke anticipates that NRCS national programs such as the Soil Health Initiative and water-quality improvement projects will be important in Idaho. The Soil Health Initia-

## ELKE ENTERS *Cont. from Pg. 2*

tive has been gaining traction in South Dakota, and he stresses the importance of it in Idaho, too.

Elke grew up on a family farm near Cavalier, North Dakota, where their family raised sugar beets, hard red spring wheat, barley, pinto beans and livestock. "From a child growing up on a farm and ranch, I learned the importance of sustainable agriculture and soil health."

In South Dakota, "it's taken a couple of years to get everybody talking about soil health," he says. "We're trying to address sustainable agriculture -- building up the organic matter in the soil profile-- that's really important. We talk about the financial gains, cropping productivity increases and other land improvements that can come from converting to minimal-till/no-till farming. But there still is a fair amount of excessive tillage that's going on.

"We're trying to provide proven technology and research to farmers about the benefits of soil health, residue management and crop rotation," he continues. "Planting cover crops has really improved crop yields by building the soil organic matter and increasing microbial activity."

Elke has also worked an equal amount of his career in the private sector from agricultural sales and management to owning his own horticulture/landscaping company. His experiences in the private sector included being a regional sales manager for Concord Environmental soil exploration equipment, sales and promotion of the Concord no-till drills and sugar beet equipment. He believes that private sector experience is useful for any federal employee.

"I learned a lot about leadership, salesmanship and the importance of customer service," he says. "I used to cold-call as many as 40 people each day as part of my job. That's good experience for anyone. You learn how to work with various people, gaining and earning their trust."

Elke started his career for NRCS as a Soil Conservation Engineering Technician in North Dakota. He worked as a Soil Conservationist and District Conservationist in Oklahoma, dealing with forestry and range management issues. Later, Elke was pro-

moted to Assistant State Conservationist for Operations in Massachusetts before he moved to his latest Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations position in South Dakota.

In Massachusetts he had experience dealing with the cranberry growers, dairy, orchards, agri-tourism and aquaculture operations. Elke has heard that Idaho has big-time aquaculture operations in the Thousand Springs region near Hagerman and Twin Falls. "I'm hoping I can bring my experiences from Massachusetts and apply that in Idaho," he says.

In Eastern South Dakota he had the experience dealing with a majority of cropland being mainly Corn and Soybeans with some wheat, native rangeland, and many animal waste management systems. In the NRCS state office in Brookings, S.D. Elke supervised and managed a staff of 75 people in 21 field offices. His job was to "make sure my worker bees had the technical and administrative training and tools they need to succeed and providing top notch customer service," he said. He also worked as a part-time naturalist for the City of Brookings Dakota Nature Park where he assisted the community with interpretive education.



Easements and managing wetlands on agriculture production land was one of the major areas he worked on in South Dakota. He has developed expertise on wetland compliance policy and procedures. Also promoting the best practices used to address the water quality issues in and around the watershed tributaries on the James River, the Big Sioux River and the Missouri River.

Many of these projects involved effective soil infiltration practices up stream and



or installing drainage systems where they made sense. One drainage system method involved installing small-diameter perforated tile 3-4 feet beneath the soil surface to facilitate drainage, known as "tiling."

"People ask me if I'm for or against tiling, and I say "yes," there are opportunities when tiling makes good sense, however it's also a practice that can be overused," Elke says.

Working on wetlands issues for NRCS required a balance between protecting the environment and helping farmers stay in business, he says. "We had to ride the middle of the fence between environmental interests and agricultural interests. It can be a difficult balancing act."

Elke said he developed strong relationships with conservation partners in South Dakota and hopes to do the same in Idaho. "I will always have an open door for any group to come visit, spend some time and get to know you," he said. "I'm looking forward to that."

Partnerships with ag-friendly groups and conservation groups is crucial. "By working together, we can go after our vision to make things better for future generations. Partnerships have been key in South Dakota, and I'm sure they're going to be key in Idaho as well," Elke says.

It's interesting that Elke's two kids ended up working for NRCS. He said they both received degrees in natural resources management from North Dakota State University. His son works as a soil conservationist for NRCS in North Dakota, and his daughter

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## OTHER CONSERVATION NEWS

### COMMITMENT PROPOSED TO STRENGTHEN CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP

National conservation partner associations recently launched a multi-year commitment to strengthening conservation planning. The goal is to reinvigorate traditional and new partnerships as the foundation for voluntary conservation delivery.

The commitment was memorialized in February through a memorandum of agreement signed by the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA), National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), National District Employee Association, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and the Resource Conservation & Development Council (RC&D).

State and local conservation organizations and agencies are considering signing on to state-level MOAs with traditional partners. States like Idaho with active existing agreements have been asked to update theirs only if necessary.

National partners say it will build upon the already "world class federal/state/local conservation delivery system that supports local-level and private landowner/land user conservation decision-making."

Between now and fall, nationwide planning teams will develop action plans for:

- Partnerships, leveraging, and capacity building;
- Technical processes, tools, and their integration;
- Communications and messaging;
- Performance, goals, outcomes, and accountability, and
- Training, development and certification programs.

Landowner/land user and Tribal clients will be involved via focus groups to understand needs and expectations about delivery of science-based, practical, and economically-sound conservation planning.

Commission and IASCD Boards will explore updating our partnership agreement and, if desired, will consider signing a new MOA at a joint board meeting in June.

### LEADERS URGE PRESIDENT TO GET TREATY RENEWAL ON TRACK

Congressional delegates fear that Columbia River Treaty (CRT) negotiations have stalled before they've started.

In a letter written last month expressing "consternation" with the pace and process for the renegotiation of the CRT, 26 federal elected officials from the Pacific Northwest have asked President Obama for quick action.

The CRT was signed in 1964 between the US and Canada to provide hydro-power benefits and flood control to communities along the Columbia River in Oregon and Washington. It expires in 2024.

Either country can initiate significant changes to the CRT (including termination) with ten years notice to the other. Upon expiration, certain flood control provisions expire automatically, while others would continue.

If no notice is given, the current pre-paid system converts to a significantly more expensive "called upon" process where the US must request Canada's assistance with flood control as needed, and would pay for services as they are delivered.

Regional stakeholders, including many Idahoans, worked for several years to hammer out a controversial consensus-based recommendation that was delivered in September 2013 to the Obama Administration.

Among other things, it was controversial largely for the inclusion of ecosystem provisions the Treaty that is currently limited to flood control and hydro-power.

Some stakeholders argued (to no avail) that the US already has environmental laws protecting natural resources, and that the renegotiated CRT should be limited to historic intent and issues.

### Conservation the Idaho Way

ISSUE TEN

IDAHOO SOIL &amp; WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION

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#### RENEWAL OF COLUMBIA RIVER TREATY COULD OPEN PANDORA'S BOX

This year, Canadian authorities and the U.S. Department of State are considering the possibility of renewing the Columbia River Treaty, a long-held agreement that provides flood control benefits for Washington and Oregon communities on the banks of the Columbia River and hydropower benefits in the Pacific Northwest.

If the treaty is renewed, both Canadian and United States interests are discussing the possibility of broadening the scope of the agreement to include issues such as "ecosystem-based function," expanding flood-control operations, and other issues that Idaho legislators and Idaho Water Users Association officials find troubling.

But Jim Yost, an Idaho member of the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, said the U.S. recommendations for renewing the treaty have been narrowed to the point where he does not see any threats to Idaho water rights or existing reservoir operations.

"I don't think there are realistically serious threats to Idaho water in this particular discussion," Yost said in an interview. "Whenever you open up a treaty, there's always the potential risk."

But after negotiations with Native American tribes, the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, those risks appear to be minimal, Yost said.

The 2014 Idaho Legislature passed a measure, House Joint Memorial No. 10 (HJM 10), sponsored by Rep. Gayle Batt, R-Weiser, that expresses concerns to Congress and the U.S. Department of State about the potential pitfalls of expanding the scope of the treaty. "There's huge implications if they go that direction," Batt said.

Norm Semanko, executive director and

general counsel of the Idaho Water Users Association, testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources in November 2013, expressing similar concerns.

"The purpose of the Columbia River Treaty is to reduce impacts from flooding and to increase power production," Semanko said. "The U.S. has proposed 'modernizing' the treaty to include ecosystem-based function as a third primary purpose of the treaty, while recognizing other additional elements such as future water supply, recreation and navigation needs. Irrigation is another important, authorized purpose, which should be expressly recognized in the final regional recommendation to the U.S. Department of State."

"Ecosystem-based function should not receive greater recognition or stature under the treaty than ... the other long-authorized purposes in the basin, including irrigation, water supply, recreation and navigation," he said.

#### BACKGROUND

The Columbia River Treaty has been in effect since 1964. Flood control services were initially prepaid to Canada through 2024, at which time the treaty automatically continues as is, or can be renewed or cancelled. A ten-year notice (mid-September 2014) must be given if either the US or Canada wish to renew or cancel the treaty. If no notice is given the current pre-paid system converts to a "called upon" process where the US must request Canada's assistance with flood control as needed, and pays for services as they are delivered.



After the treaty was signed originally, it authorized the construction of three dams in Canada (Mica, Duncan and Keenleyside) and one in Montana (Libby Dam) to provide flood-control for communities along the Columbia River in Washington and Oregon, while also providing more hydroelectric power capacity to the region. Altogether, the Canadian dams provide 15.5 million acre-feet of water storage. Libby Dam provides another 5 million acre-feet of storage. One acre-foot is equivalent to a football field or one acre of land flooded to the depth of one foot.

The hydropower from the three Canadian dam projects provides approximately 483 average megawatts of electricity, an amount that provides enough power to heat 280,000 homes. That power was sold to a consortium of utilities in the United States in the mid-1960s for \$254 million. When the dams were completed, the U.S. paid Canada \$64.4 million for 50 percent of the present value of the expected benefits of flood-control along the lower Columbia River from 1968 to 2024.

Discussions on the terms of renewing the

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Visit our website at the link below to read more about the renewal of the Columbia River Treaty from the April 2014

But, leaders say, the US is still talking with itself, not Canada.

Now that the recommendation has been reviewed, the Delegation wrote, the internal debate should conclude "expeditiously". It's time for the United States government to finalize a negotiating process and formally engage Canada, they say.

Treaty modernization and negotiation efforts impacting 1,200+ miles of the Columbia River, they wrote, "directly affect the economy, environment, and flood control needs" in Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Oregon.

"The Columbia River plays a critical role in the economy and culture of each of our states, and potential management changes initiated through the Treaty could have major impacts far into the future."

For more on the CRT click here or paste the following into your browser: <http://www.swc.idaho.gov/media/16248/april-2014-newsletter.pdf>

# ELKE ENTERS Cont.. from Pg. 2

works in Montana as a district conservationist-tribal liaison.

Elke likes to spend as time as he can with his two grandchildren. Miles between them make it challenging at times, but Elke has enjoyed teaching his granddaughter, age seven, how to fish and golf, and soon his grandson who is age one, how to fish and golf, as well. Fishing on Devils Lake is prime for walleye, perch and northern pike. "I love catching walleye, they're great-eating fish," he says.

Elke looks forward to learning how to fly fish in Idaho. He's never tried fly fishing before.

A graduate of North Dakota State Universi-

ty, Elke received multiple degrees in horticulture and landscape design, and soil science, with an emphasis in civil engineering.

"I am looking forward to this great opportunity to serve" he says. □

## Transtrum helps Bear Lake SWCD get ahead of fire in Idaho

*Reprinted with permission from NACD Forestry Notes, Spring 2015*

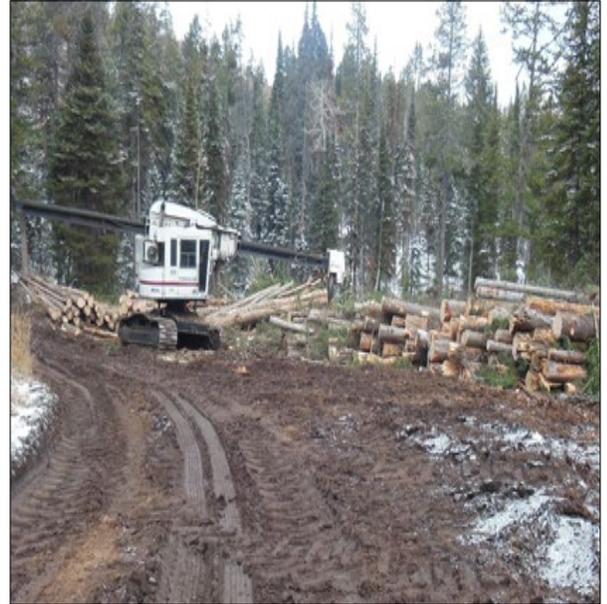
Bear Lake SWCD started working on fuels reduction grants in 2010. Thanks to a large group of partners the program remains strong.

Paris Hallows is tucked away in the Idaho wilderness. The 80-acre property—once an old mining claim—is surrounded by the Caribou-Targhee National Forest which attracts tourists who enjoy hiking and four-wheeling, and is used by ranchers for summer grazing.

The property was owned by the Larsen family but in recent years has been divided into 11 lots of varying size that individual family members and friends manage.

"These landowners enjoy the peace and quiet that comes with being in the middle of nowhere," says Bear Lake Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) Manager of Operations Lisa Transtrum. "But the threat of wildfire has become a worry. Some of our homeowners here have lost their homeowner's insurance policy because of the increasing potential of wildfire."

With the help of U.S. Forest Service Hazardous Fuels Reduction (HFR) funding,



*Fuels management is a priority for Bear Lake SWCD.*

Bear Lake SWCD is working to thin the forest land within Paris Hallows and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

Field crews trim ladder fuels, eliminate crown cover and clean the forest floor. "The tricky part is to please each landowner by taking and leaving the correct trees. To be a contractor on these big projects you need just the right kind of equipment as to leave as little of a trace as possible," Transtrum says.

In addition to the district, Forest Service and participating landowners, other project partners include the Bear Lake County Commissioners, Idaho Department of Lands, Highlands Cooperative Weed Management Area, and Bear Lake County Weed Control Department.

"I try to bring as many cooperating agencies together at the table as possible," Transtrum says. □

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