

# Urban conservation and more

*what's up at the ADA District*



**Reinvigorating the** *Idaho Conservation*  
**partnership: building a new door**

## Busy, urban Ada District partners on stormwater, diverse projects

By Steve Stuebner

Multiple partners gathered at the Riverside Hotel in Garden City in mid-October to publicize a new storm-water water-quality project in a parking lot next to the hotel convention center and the Boise River.

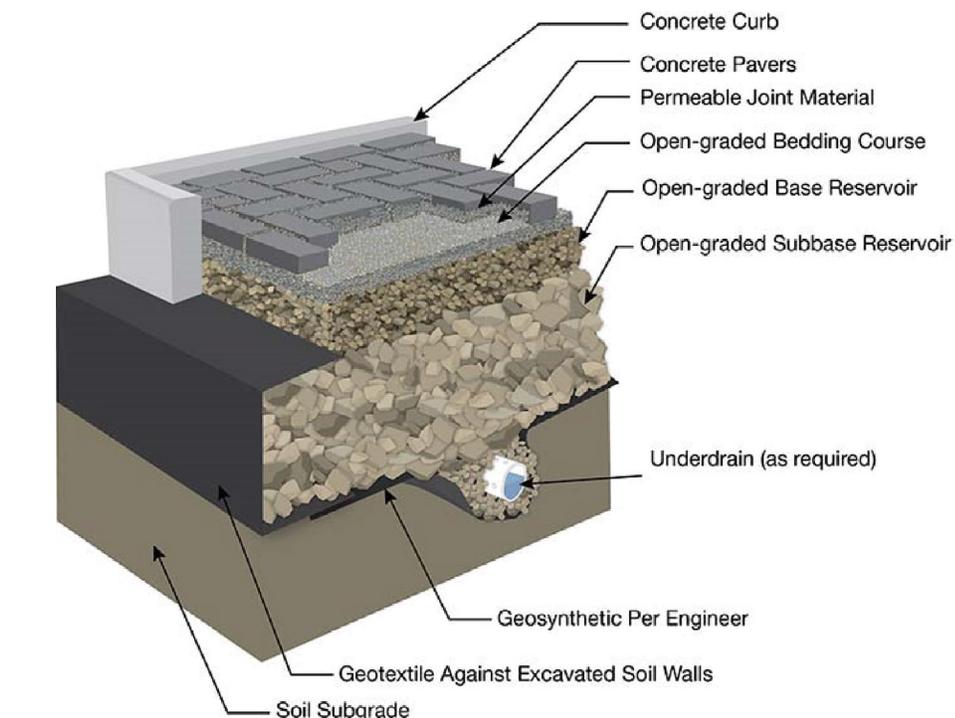
Riverside co-owner Lynda Johnson said the idea for the storm-water project started out of an informal conversation with Liz Paul, a private consultant, and then Riverside hired the Land Group and others to funnel storm-water from the 1.5-acre parking lot through “permeable pavers” to prevent sediment, bacteria, chemicals and other things from flowing directly into the Boise River.

“Our goal is to let others know how to do this now that we know how,” said Johnson, who mentioned that water quality in the Boise River has been important to her family for many years, a family that has agricultural roots in the Treasure Valley. “This project is important for our children and grandchildren.”

The Riverside Hotel is already planning Phase 2 of the storm-water project with the Ada Soil and Water Conservation District and Paul. They are working together on a Section 319 water quality grant application to DEQ to set up a permeable pavers project on the much-larger parking lot on the west side of the Riverside Hotel property.

“Typically, storm-water from Garden City businesses goes directly into the Boise River,” said Josie Erskine, district manager for Ada SWCD. “Water quality in the Boise River is an urban problem and an ag problem. We’re trying to shift the conversation to a point where water quality needs to be addressed by all water users, urban and ag.”

“The owners did this voluntarily – this is voluntary conservation,” Paul said. “Permeable pavers are the most cost-effective way to capture storm-water on site, and the Riverside Hotel is setting an



example for other businesses to follow suit. Today marks the dawning of a new era where small businesses can treat storm-water in a sustainable way.”

Barry Burnell, water quality division administrator for the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, was impressed with the project. “What a great improvement,” he said. “This is green storm-water infrastructure to improve the swimming and fishing in the Boise River and keep oil and grease out of the river. The pavers really work! They’ve been tested, and we have no lingering doubts.

“We’d really like to see other private companies do the same thing.”

The nice thing about the permeable pavers project at the Riverside is it’s a permanent fix, Erskine said. “They’re using a best management practice and bringing things up to code. That’s a good thing.”

“Not all of the water quality problems in the Boise River are agriculturally related,” adds Lynn McKee of the Ada SWCD board of directors. “This is a great move to inform and educate the urban community about storm-water issues. They can take these same BMP’s and use them to protect water quality in new construction and retrofitting existing situations.”

The Ada SWCD, being located in Idaho’s most populated county, has an interesting nexus between rural agriculture and a gradually encroaching urban zone. The district has been busy working on Boise River water-quality issues as well as environmental education with 5<sup>th</sup> graders, testing a new type of bacteria to control the growth of noxious weeds on rangelands in the county, and doing some planning on the potential preservation of farmland in the western portion of the county.

Through the Conservation Innovation Grant program with NRCS, the Ada district is working with several different agencies, including the U.S. Geological Survey, to test the effectiveness of bacteria that naturally inhibit the growth of medusahead and cheatgrass, both non-native invasive grass species, in the root zone.

This is a project that the multi-agency Sage Grouse Action Group was interested in exploring from a rangeland restoration perspective, and it made sense for the Ada SWCD to be involved because of the many rangelands in the county, Erskine says.

“If you look at our district, we have a massive amount of land in the high desert ecotype,” she said. “We go from the

*Stormwater projects, cont. on Page 3*



*Environmental education for 5th Graders*

Snake River to the Boise Foothills. We have a lot of high desert grazing land.”

The USGS has set up 84 small research plots in three general locations – one in the Avimor residential development by the Spring Valley Ranch, north of Eagle, a second location on BLM land in the Snake River Plain, and the third site on state land in the Owyhees.

They are studying the effectiveness of two strains of bacterium called D-7 and MB-906, both of which can inhibit the growth of non-native grasses in areas where a mix of non-native grasses and perennial grasses exist, said Matt Germino, USGS supervisory research ecologist.

“It’s a big, big experiment, and it’s under way,” Germino said.

The two bacterium strains come from the bacterium, *Pseudomonas fluorescens*, a widely distributed critter that also is helpful in consuming petroleum products in ground water, cleaning up oil spills. “There’s a huge amount of diversity in the species,” Germino said.

D-7 and MB-906 have been or are being used in the aftermath of the 2015 Soda Fire in Owyhee County and on areas burned in 2016 in hopes of giving new perennial grasses a chance to survive, he said, but more research is needed to know the best way to work with the bacterium, he said. “I recommended we take a step back and build a strong

foundation before we get too far ahead of ourselves.”

In the test plots, researchers are conducting control burns to remove the grass straw, and then then spraying the bacterium on the soil with or without herbicides that target non-native grasses, and also with or without tillage, to see how the bacterium work. No new native perennial grasses will be planted for now. The research project will occur for 2-5 years.

“We chose sites that were co-dominated by perennials and annuals, and we wanted to see if we have some reductions in the annuals,” Germino said. “If effective, the bacteria might provide a bridge between the short-term effectiveness of bacteria and the years required for perennial competitors to increase and defend the site from re-invasion.”

Over time, if the bacterium prove to be helpful in combating the spread of noxious grasses, they could be used to help restore rangelands on a broader scale.

In September, the Ada SWCD organized the annual 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Field Days, expanding to five days of operation in four locations, an increase from three days and three locations in years past.

“Our goal and purpose for this event is to give 5<sup>th</sup> graders from different schools in our valley a first-hand look at agriculture,” said Glen Edwards, chairman of the Ada SWCD. “We want to show how agriculture is important to the economy of the Treasure Valley. We also want to teach them that their food doesn’t come from the store – it comes from farms.”

About 1,200 kids participated this year, along with teachers and chaperones. The kids go through seven different stations to learn about fire, water, soils, wildlife, birds of prey, and more. Many partner groups provide the stations including the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Idaho DEQ, University of Idaho Extension, NRCS, Forest Service, and more.

The five locations included three farms, two in Kuna and one in Boise, and two days at the Boise Urban Garden School, Erskine said.

“It was a really great event,” she said. “The kids seemed to love being outside and doing some hands-on learning.”

Another big initiative that the Ada SWCD is working on relates to the potential preservation of farm land in Ada County. Several Ada SWCD members attended an Ada County Planning & Zoning meeting, and a committee that is planning ahead, called the 2025 Committee, was interested in looking at the possible preservation of agricultural land as the county grows to the south and west.

For example, does it makes sense to pave over some of the best soil in western Ada County because the land can be sold to a developer for a subdivision?

“We’d like to start the discussion on this topic,” said Erskine. “It’s so important for our future to be forward-thinking about this issue. Do we want to save the soils that are most productive for growing food for our communities and for our nation? We have good soil in Eagle, and good soil in Meridian. What’s our soil profile going to look like 200 years from now?”

“Some of our board members gave testimony about the pros and cons of preserving farmland,” Edwards adds. “Some talked about the need to take action quickly. It seems as though more people and organizations are getting on the band wagon about this issue. People are thinking more about open space in the valley. One of the best places for open space is farmland. It is becoming a statewide issue.”

The Ada SWCD would like to take legislation to the Idaho Legislature to create a way for the state to preserve farm land open space, Erskine said. “If we want to access federal dollars for land preservation, we need state matching funds,” she said. “Other states have matching funds and an employee to work on preserving open space.”

Edwards said Ada SWCD is bringing up the issue at a state conference to see if there is a groundswell of support among other districts. “We realize this is an issue that we should have started on years ago, but feel there is still time to do something.”

*Steve Stuebner writes about conservation success stories on a regular basis for the Conservation Commission.*

## Building a door, reinvigorating the Idaho Conservation partnership

*“If opportunity doesn’t knock, build a door”*

— Milton Berle

A wise friend once told me there are only two ways to do a thing: the way we’ve always done it, and some other way. It’s time for another way.

Idaho’s traditional conservation partners – Districts, the Commission, and NRCS – have effectively advanced agricultural stewardship in Idaho since the late 1930s. In the last decade or so though, attrition and a decline in funding and resources has slowed both pace and scale. As I reported at Division meetings around the state last month, for the partnership to remain relevant over time, something’s got to change. We have to step beyond the way we’ve traditionally done conservation and build a door to new opportunities and levels of effectiveness.

New resources that build capacity and expand the partnership must be identified and successfully pursued: competition for existing and potential conservation funding and resources is tight. And new conservation champions are needed to carry on. With 78 years under our partnership belt, it’s time to reassess what we’re doing, and figure out how to meet these and other challenges. So rather than focus on what was, we’re setting a new goal: reinvigorating and expanding the traditional conservation partnership.

With no new funding or positions, we’ve nevertheless identified a way forward. We’ve reconfigured our internal state-wide district support administrative workload and have hired a new Technical Records Specialist ¾ time to help energize and expand the local, state, and federal conservation partnership. It’s a big task.

Chris Banks, of Chesterfield, Idaho, joins us November 7th to help accomplish our goal. Chris brings with him a wealth of knowledge and skills in building effective districts, partnerships, securing funding, and engaging the next-generation of conservationists. Curtis Elke, State Conservationist with NRCS, has provided office space for Chris in Soda Springs and will likely support “door-building” in other ways. Chris will also work part time in Boise.

Working for Delwyne and with each of you, one of the very first tasks on Chris’ to-do list is to conduct a statewide assessment of the traditional conservation partnership and partners – where we’re strong and where we need to improve. He’ll document needs, challenges, and opportunities. He’ll look at existing relationships and identify potential partnerships and opportunities for greater coordination. He’ll identify district and Commission training needs.

Working with Districts, IASCD, IDEA, Commissioners, NRCS, and other stakeholders, he’ll develop the Commission’s Capacity Building Action Plan to enhance Idaho’s voluntary conservation services delivery system collaboratively. He’ll look at what other states have done and develop a plan that’s uniquely Idahoan and fits within Conservation the Idaho Way.

He’ll develop documentation for standard operating procedures, leadership curriculum and training materials, and onboarding for new Commission employees. If time permits, he may do the same for interested districts, as well. Also high on his list is to identify and implement new strategies to diversify funding and partnership resources. He’s charged with

building new relationships from which new opportunities arise.



Perhaps most importantly, he’s charged with inspiring and involving the next-generation of conservation champions. He’ll work on a strategy to recruit career-ready millennials and others in voluntary conservation activities and the partnership. Over time, we may even see an internship program to feed district and Commission employee, supervisor, and commissioner recruitment.

Those of you who know Chris know he’s long been dedicated as a volunteer to developing young conservationists through the Idaho Envirothon. We think that should continue. Envirothon is an effective vehicle for meeting our goal too so Chris will be assigned as the Commission’s representative on Idaho’s annual Envirothon and the 2018 Idaho International Envirothon committees.

Stay tuned. We’re serious about building this door, reinvigorating the partnership.

We’ll present our new work plan at the 7:00 am Commission Listening Session at the IASCD Conference in Pocatello on November 17th. We’d like to hear your thoughts – so please make it a priority to get up early and join us to talk about building the door and reinvigorating the partnership. If you can’t make it but have input for us, please give Delwyne a call, 810-0770. -



## COMMISSION UPDATE

Thanks to our hosts for the annual Fall IASCD Division meetings last month. It's always a good time to catch up, hear about the latest district accomplishments, and reflect on the many ways the partnership contributes to making Idaho great.

We accomplished quite a bit with and for our partners this year – here are a few highlights from the Commission's FY 2016 Performance Measures Report. By statute, the Commission is required to submit to the Governor and Legislature an annual performance measures report (PMR). The numbers were encouraging:

- District satisfaction with Commission assistance was up 16.7%, from 74.3% in FY 2015 to 91% in FY 2016.
- Dissatisfaction was down 11.2%, from 17.2% in FY 2015 to 6% in FY 2016.
- Commission staff assisted 38 districts with projects, worked on 34 new projects, 101 ongoing projects, and served 241 landowners.
- Twelve new conservation loans were made through the RCRDP (up 5 from the previous year), \$875,049 was loaned (up from ~\$400,000 the previous year). The total loaned increased 223%.63. The number of loan inquiries involving a degree of evaluation increased to 63, yet the number of loan applications decreased to 15. Just three applications were unfunded. The average loan amount increased to \$72,921.

- In Nitrate Priority Areas, 42,594 acres were treated, 145,370 lbs of nitrates were reduced, 29,575 lbs of phosphorus were reduced, and 150,170 lbs of sediment were reduced.
- Staff completed 7 TMDL Agricultural Implementation Plans, 17 were in progress, and 18 were pending.
- The Commission website had over 70,000 visitors, 230 Facebook posts reaching over 48,000 people, and the newsletter was sent monthly to ~600 subscribers.

### FY 2017 District Allocations

In July, all Idaho districts received base, operating, capacity building, and special (Clearwater Fire Recovery Zone) funding. In August, districts submitted their local match reports and the District Allocation Work Group (DAWG) convened to review them. Their recommendation for funding levels was approved by the Commission Board and distributed in September. District allocations are now 100% distributed for FY 2017.

### FY 2018 Budget Request

A modest \$3,385,600 FY 2018 Budget Request was submitted in September. The Request included Commission personnel and operating funds, funds to replace three aged and worn light duty trucks, and as a follow-on to last year's Clearwater Fire Recovery Zone Pilot Project, \$300,000 for distribution via the Trustee and Benefit Fund.

As conceptualized and requested by IASCD, funds are requested to expand

fire recovery efforts statewide. Funding will make possible district-led programs for regionally coordinated emergency responses that assess, mitigate, and prevent the effects of wildfire on private lands in the State of Idaho. Here's how it would work.

Funds (\$50,000) would be allocated to a lead district in each of six divisions statewide. Following fire events occurring between July 1 and December 31<sup>st</sup>, the lead district would facilitate efforts of all participating conservation districts in the division, county commissioners, cities, emergency management coordinators, and others as needed. Ranking criteria developed during the Pilot Project would be applied to rank potential mitigation efforts. If a division had no qualifying fire events prior to December 31<sup>st</sup>, the funding could be used between January 2 and June 30<sup>th</sup> for thinning and other fuels management activities in the division. Award of thinning and fuels management funding would be subject to the development of ranking criteria, as well. An annual report on the outcomes would be made, possibly to be submitted by each division for inclusion in the Commission's annual germane reports.

There has also been some side talk of refunding the now defunct Water Quality Program for Agriculture (WQPA), or in the alternative, appropriating more funding to the 319 Program. Stay tuned, but refunding WQPA would obviously be a big boon to district implementation project efforts, and the Program is still functional with statute and rules in place. A funding request for WQPA was not included in the Commission's Budget Request.

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We'll find out if the Governor recommends our Requested Budget in January. We hope so! It would provide a big boost toward meeting water quality goals around the state.

### New RCRDP Loan Rates

New loan rates were set in August. They are:

- 2.5% for a 7 year term
- 2.75% for a 10 year term on new equipment (secured by equipment or real estate)
- 3.0% for an 8-12 year term
- 3.25% for a 13-15 year term
- 5% for loans (secured by a combination of 1<sup>st</sup> lien equipment and 2<sup>nd</sup> Mortgage)
- 6% for loans secured by second mortgages

### Hogen Retires

After 28 years of dedicated service,



Mark "supervises" Kootenai-Shoshone Supervisor Fran Hughes' willow planting efforts on the banks of the Coeur d'Alene River.

the Commission's longest serving water quality resource conservationist, Mark Hogen, retired September 30th. Mark has served in various locations around the state, most recently in Coeur d'Alene. Mark's dedication to conservation and his knowledge make him difficult to replace. We'll miss him.

His position will be filled as soon as possible, hopefully by mid to late November.

Thanks for all you do!

## Tentative FY 2017 Commission Meeting Schedule\*

**November 17**, Listening Session and Regular Meeting - IASCD Annual Conference, Pocatello

**December**, No mtg, Holiday break

**January wk of 30th** - coincide w/JFAC mtg, Idaho Water Center - Boise

**February wk of 20th** - coincide w/Ag Summit, Idaho Water Center - Boise

**March**, No mtg, Spring Div Meetings

**April 20**, 8:00 am, Idaho Water Center-Boise

**May 11**, 8:00 am - coincide w/Forestry Contest, North Idaho Field Meeting

**June 15**, 8:00 am, Idaho Water Center-Boise

\*Please confirm meetings by reviewing agendas posted at [www.swc.idaho.gov](http://www.swc.idaho.gov) or calling 208-258-4752 before attending.

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*Conservation the Idaho Way: Sowing Seeds of Stewardship*