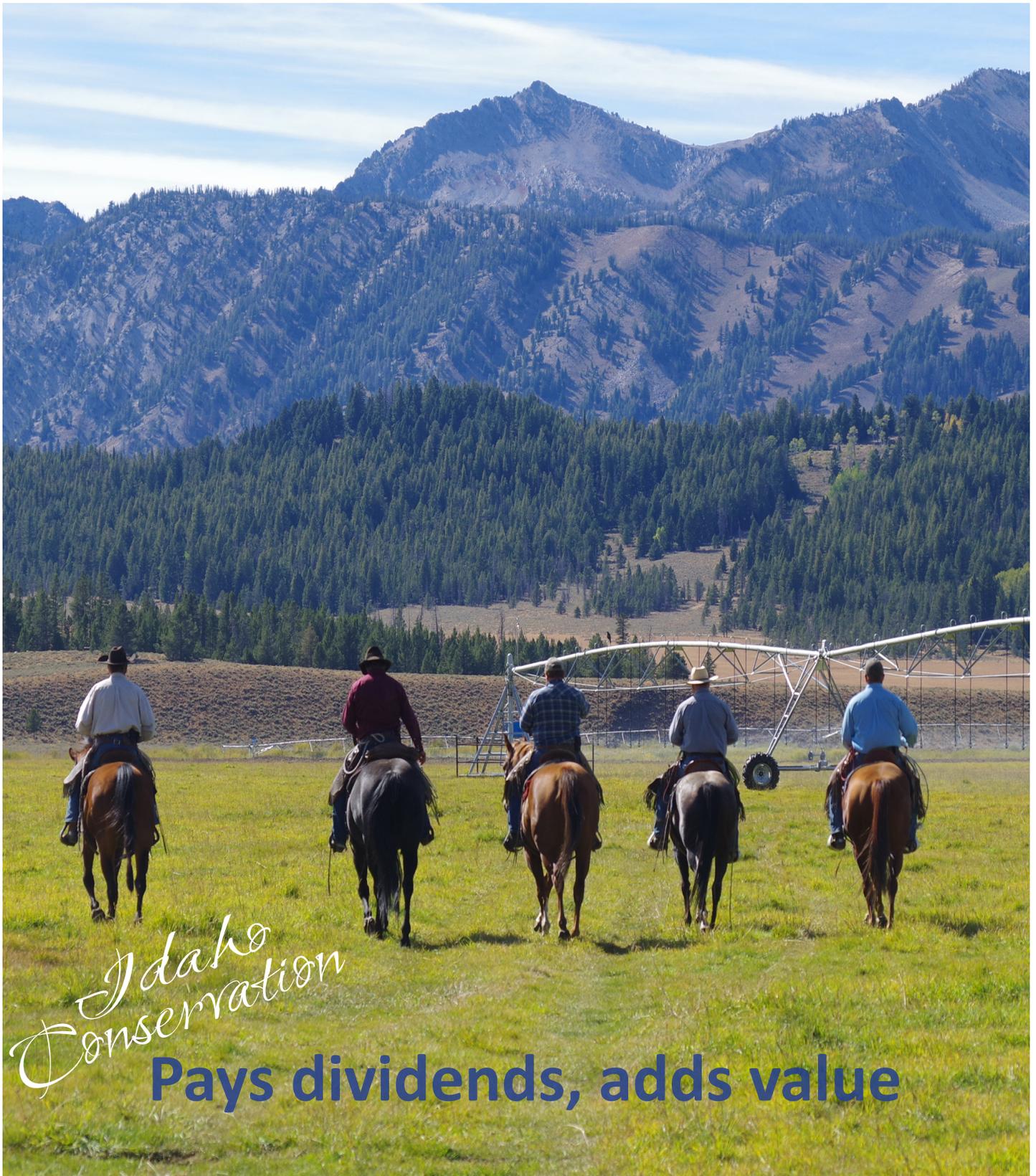

Conservation the Idaho Way

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IDAHO SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION

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*Idaho
Conservation*

Pays dividends, adds value

Conservation the Idaho Way pays dividends for soil, water, & wildlife, adds value to ranches and farms

“Take care of the land, and the land will take care of you.” – Hugh Hammond Bennett

By Steve Stuebner

Idaho is endowed with a magnificent blend of diverse natural landscapes -- rivers, lakes, mountains, forests, rangelands 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. They know that caring for the land will reap benefits for future generations. Their livelihoods depend on it.

“If you want to improve wildlife habitat on private land, it’s best to work with people who are closest to the land, and that’s our farmers and ranchers,” says Lt. Gov. Brad Little, who has spent a lifetime ranching in Emmett. “Endangered species issues get all the attention, but the most important thing is to protect the soil and water -- you take care of those two things and everything else will follow.”

The Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Idaho’s 50 soil and water conservation districts all have a central mission – and that’s assisting private landowners in planning, designing and implementing voluntary conservation projects to benefit soil, water, fish and wildlife.

Ultimately, farmers and ranchers are the key to making voluntary conservation projects happen.

“It all starts with a willing participant coming in the door, and that opens up many more doors – opportunities to apply best practices with the latest technology and science-based projects to help conserve our natural resources,” says Curtis Elke, Idaho State Director of the NRCS. “Those projects often create jobs with contractors assisting with the conservation work, and the projects benefit not only the farms and ranches but also our communities.”

“It’s all about relationships and solving problems at the ground level,” adds Teri Murrison, Administrator of the Conservation Commission. “Landowners may approach our staff, the NRCS staff or district staff, but once that conversation begins, it leads to the formulation of a project to solve the problem, finding grants, cost-

share assistance and other partners to fund the project, and then project implementation. With every project, you’ll see boots-on-the-ground conservation at work to benefit our natural resources and add value to our farms and ranches.”

Amos Eno of the Resources First Foundation encourages Idaho’s conservation leaders to step up investments in private land conservation because of the value of fish and wildlife resources and biodiversity on private lands. “Private lands are five times as important as other lands because they control all the water,” Eno said. “They host the vast majority of both wetlands (70%) and endangered species habitats (75%). Private lands are our reservoirs of biodiversity. These lands have our greatest potential for conservation.”

Eno, who spoke at the Idaho Conservation Summit in 2015, quotes Aldo Leopold, “The geography of conser-



Lt. Governor and voluntary conservationist, Brad Little, on his ranch in Emmett

vation is such that most of the best land will always be held privately for agricultural production. The bulk of responsibility for conservation thus necessarily devolves upon the private custodian, especially the farmer.”

Conservation professionals with the districts, NRCS and the Conservation Commission are the experts who know how to put the projects together and find much-needed funding from a multiplicity of sources. Conservation projects may prevent soil erosion, reduce water consumption, improve water quality, restore native plant communities, enhance wildlife habitat, restore lands after wildfires, and more.

Each year, there are literally hundreds of voluntary conservation projects that occur statewide. Here are a few projects we’ve featured in *Conservation the Idaho Way* in the last year.

Pole Creek Restoration near Smiley Creek, Sawtooth Valley – One of the more complex projects involving at least 10 different local, state and federal agencies led to the restoration of Pole Creek water flows to benefit juvenile and adult salmon, steelheads and resident fish, while keeping the water flowing to 1,000 acres of private land pasture owned by Salmon Falls Land and Livestock. The Custer

Soil and Water Conservation District, Sawtooth National Recreation Area, NRCS, Governor’s Office of Species Conservation and Hagerman Rancher Mike Henslee all played key roles in the award-winning project.

A&B Irrigation District water pipeline - Construction contractors built a 19-mile pipeline in record time as well as a new water-pumping station next to the Milner Pool to convert 1,500 acres of farm land in Minidoka

County that had been served with ground water to surface water. The project serves 6,000 acres of farm land north of the Snake River. The NRCS contributed \$3.8 million to the project by providing Farm Bill funds to 29 producers in the A&B District, and the Idaho Water Resource Board loaned the district \$7 million to assist with the project.

Clearwater Fire Rehabilitation - In the aftermath of the Clearwater Complex wildfires last summer, the Nez Perce, Idaho, Clearwater, Latah, and Lewis soil and water conservation districts are partnering with the Conservation Commission, Idaho Department of Lands, the U.S. Forest Service, NRCS, Farm



Old diversion at Pole Creek



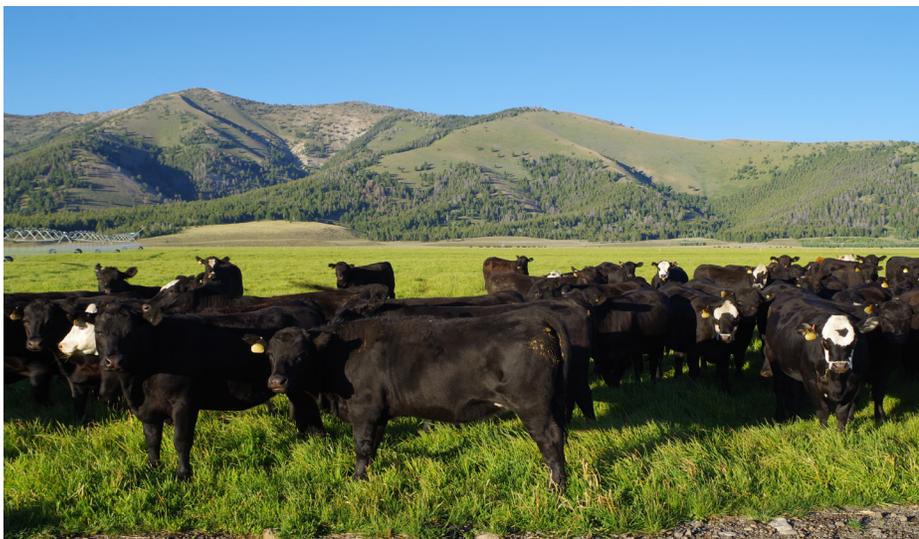
New diversion at Pole Creek



Pipe used in A&B Pipeline’s ESPA Project



Pipe used in project, staged in field



Pole Creek, a complex restoration with stunning results

Service Agency, and University of Idaho extension agents, among others, to formulate rehabilitation and restoration plans for private lands in the burn zone. All told, 226,790 acres of land burned in nine different wildfires in a five-county area. Twenty-six percent of the land affected was private land, 63 percent on federal land, 4 percent on Nez Perce tribal land and 3 percent on state land. Rehabilitation efforts are expected to take up to 10 years, including seeding, fencing, water-quality projects and timber salvage projects.

LESA sprinkler retrofits are a big hit – Low-elevation sprinkler applications apply water inside the crop canopy to reduce evaporation and wind effects, providing for more efficient water use and reductions in power use. LESA retrofits on pivot sprinklers are particularly attractive to farmers who pump into the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer to irrigate crops, because many of those farmers are required to reduce their water use under a historic water settlement between surface and ground water users.

Ada District assists with storm water best practices at Riverside Hotel – Many have attended large meetings at the Riverside Hotel, and they'd be glad to know that the hotel owners partnered with multiple agencies to build a state-of-the-art storm water capture and filtering system in the parking lot outside the convention center. The project used permeable pavers to capture and filter storm water, preventing many toxic fluids and sediment from pouring directly into the Boise River.

In fiscal year 2016, the NRCS invested more than \$17 million in various

voluntary conservation projects throughout the state of Idaho, including 417 projects under the EQIP program, agricultural conservation easements and the conservation stewardship program, according to the NRCS-Idaho fact sheet. The EQIP funding included \$1.8 million to enhance sage grouse habitat on private lands in cooperation with participating ranchers in Idaho.

In fiscal 2016, the Conservation Commission provided state funds to all 50 soil and water conservation districts in the state, including \$8,500 in base



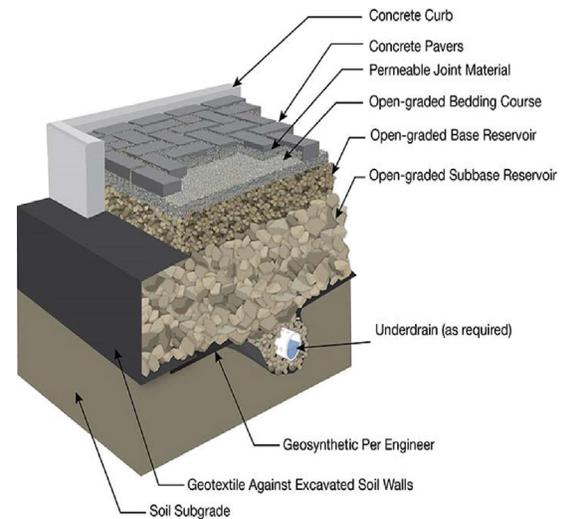
LESA nozzle



Testing permeable concrete pavers at the Riverside Hotel



Burned fence in Clearwater Complex fire



Permeable concrete pavers

funding for each district, \$2,000 in operating funds and capacity-building awards ranging from \$800 to \$2,300 per district. Together with conservation partners, the outcomes included:

- Installing conservation systems on 133,586 acres of cropland.
- Improving grazing and pasture management systems on 506,625 acres of rangeland.
- Enhancing 3,399 acres of riparian areas.
- Conservation Reserve Program on 568,839 acres.

Sage grouse, a species of special concern that has captured many headlines over the last several years, was not listed as a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act last year, but the Bureau of Land Management came out with new rules that will affect ranchers that graze livestock on federal lands. Gov. Butch Otter and others asserted that the BLM rules should have followed collaboratively-developed state sage grouse plans instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, and the state of Idaho – among other states – has filed a lawsuit challenging the rules. In the meantime, the Idaho Legislature provided a total of \$750,000 in new funding for the Governor’s Office of Species Conservation, \$250,000 of that is dedicat-

ed to work on sage grouse habitat enhancement projects on private and state lands throughout the state. It also earmarked \$110,000 to assist rancher-led Rangeland Fire Protection Association (RFPA) organizations with beefing up firefighting resources for initial attack and firefighting capabilities in remote areas.

Idaho has a new Sage Grouse Action Team made up of members from IDFG, IDL, ISWCC, OSC, TNC, BLM, USFWS, USFS, and NRCS that is reviewing project proposals for habitat enhancement projects. The BLM and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services are providing \$25,000 each to the team to help with project planning. “For these projects to work, there has to be benefits for the landowners and also for sage grouse,” said Joshua Uriarte, project manager for OSC. “The landowners need to make sure the projects work for them, and that they benefit rangeland health and sage grouse.”

Ten projects have been selected so far, Uriarte said. As one example, the Sage Grouse Action Team is restoring perennial grasses that were burned by the Soda Fire through the use of herbicides to eliminate cheatgrass and other annual grasses, and then either drilling in perennial grasses or aerial seeding during the winter months.

Bruneau Rancher Chris Black worked with the Sage Grouse Action Team and NRCS to drill new wells on his land, install solar electric energy for operating the wells in a remote area, and adding a variable speed pump to the system so if the water is needed for fire suppression, a larger flow could be used in the system.

The new water project also benefits sage grouse by creating a wet meadow area in the summer months when chicks need wet meadow habitat to

grow and feast on insects. Cattle also use the watering system.

Chris Black “hit a grand slam with this project by addressing all of these things at the same time,” Uriarte said. Partners included the Owyhee County Sage Grouse Local Working Group, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NRCS, OSC, and the landowner.

The Governor’s Office of Species Conservation has worked with numerous ranchers and other entities over the last 12 years to work on enhancing salmon and steelhead habitat on private and forest lands. The Pole Creek project mentioned earlier in this article, is one of the shining examples of that work. All of those projects are voluntary conservation initiatives with private landowners.

Ranchers have worked with OSC, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, the Commission, and other agencies to open up streams to spawning habitat that had been blocked by low water flows or irrigation diversions in the past. For example, OSC has worked on 128 habitat improvement projects since 2004, featuring 86 passage barriers that have been removed to open up 312 miles of aquatic habitat. Much of that work has occurred in the Upper Salmon River Basin on a voluntary basis with ranchers.



Sage Grouse



Black’s solar powered well

In addition, more than 63 miles of forest roads have been put back to bed and 18 miles of roads treated to reduce erosion in the Clearwater River Basin.

Over time, more landowners have expressed interest in the work as they see their neighbors achieve positive things for salmon and steelhead while adding value to their ranch properties, said Mike Edmondson, project manager for OSC. "Naturally, the landowners' conservation ethic comes out as they understand what we're trying to accomplish for the fish," he said.

In the Clearwater country, it's more about protecting the soil. "If we can keep the soil in place, we can control what's going on in the whole watershed, and that benefits the whole watershed. The farmers understand that," Edmondson said.

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"Conservation the Idaho Way" reflects the conviction that the very best way to care for and enhance the soil, water, air, plants and wildlife is through voluntary, locally led projects, Murrison says.

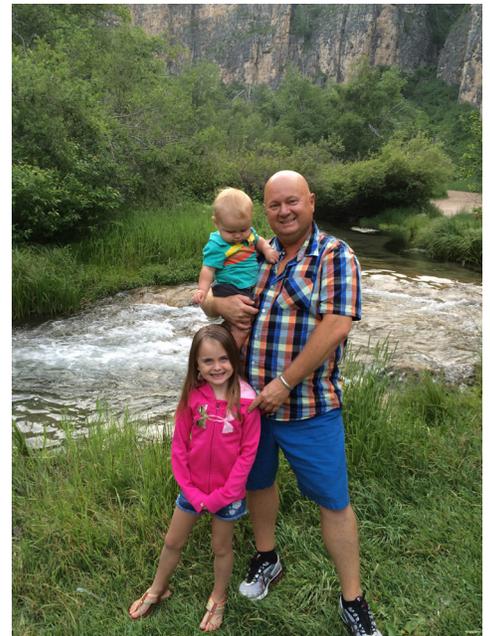
Proactive, non-regulatory projects are beneficial because they address issues of concern and avoid costly lawsuits and onerous regulations, she says. Ranchers would like to do more improvement projects on federal land, but in recent years, it's been very difficult to accomplish, particularly on Forest Service land, Little says.

He suggests that a new federal program called the Good Neighbor Authority would be a great place to start. "You could go in and take a piece of property that's been managed for multiple use, and get all the interests together, and if everyone could agree on what we want the landscape to look like, what we want the rangelands to look like -- resilient watersheds, wildlife habitat, species diversity, sustainable agriculture. So here's how the landscape is today, here's what we want it to look like in the future, what's the potential here without going to 10,000 meetings?"

Elke says the NRCS is hoping to work together with the Commission, districts, BLM, IDL, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and private landowners to take a "all lands, all hands" approach to improving rangelands, under a similar model used in the Sage Grouse Initiative on private lands.

"We want to provide more flexibility in the regulatory approach, more flexibility in grazing prescriptions," he says. "Good things are coming." □

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



Curtis Elke and his grandchildren, the next generation of conservationists



SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION

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Conservation the Idaho Way: Sowing Seeds of Stewardship