Conservation the Idaho Way

ISSUE SIXTY-TWO IDAHO SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION AUGUST 2018

Seth McFarland does photo monitoring in the Salmon area. Photo courtesy of Life on the Range.org.

RANCHERS GET ISDA HELP WITH PHOTO MONITORING ON RANGELANDS

By Steve Stuebner

We've all heard the phrase that a picture is worth a thousand words.

When it comes to monitoring the condition of Idaho's rangelands, pictures tell a story over time – especially if they're taken in the same place, at the same time of year, on a regular basis.

If you're an Idaho rancher, what's the story of your rangelands? Do you have photos to document that story over time?

About four years ago, the Idaho State Department of Agriculture (ISDA) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) forged an innovative partnership to help Idaho ranchers get engaged in range monitoring on public lands grazing allotments by taking photos on a regular basis at certain monitoring locations.

Several ranchers who have signed up to participate in the program say they have found it to be very useful. More than 300 ranchers have attended range-monitoring workshops over the last several years, and more than 30 ranchers are participating in the ISDA-BLM monitoring program statewide.

"We always think we know what we're doing, but the range monitoring helps us check on how our operations are affecting rangelands on our allotments," said Mike Guerry, a sheep and cattle rancher located near Castleford. "It's very helpful for monitoring sage-grouse projects and monitoring our range."

When ranchers sign up for the program, staff members from the Idaho State

ISDA MONITORING, *cont. on Page 2*

GOVERNOR APPOINTS OLSON TO COMMISSION

Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter has appointed Erik J. Olson to a five-year term on the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission.

A 4th generation Boundary County farmer, Olson operates a 3,000 acre farm with his dad and uncle, producing wheat, barley, canola, pulses, and alfalfa.

The Commission's newest Boardmember, Erik Olson, representing North Idaho.

"I really appreciate being appointed to the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission," said Olson. "Coming from a strong farming background, I understand the need for conservation and its importance to our future generations."

He's an associate member on the Boundary County Soil and Water Conservation District Board, serves as President of the Kootenai Valley Reclamation Association, and is a graduate of Leadership Idaho Agriculture's Class 38.

Olson and his wife Cassie own a weed management business serving Boundary County farmers and ranchers, and together they're also raising 5 children.

"I want to gain more knowledge about conservation, help educate others, and give North Idaho a strong voice in conservation around the state," said Olson. "There's no better way for me to do that than serve the Governor on the Conservation Commission."

"We are happy to have someone with the interests and qualifications of Commissioner Olson join our Board to do the good work of the conservation partnership," said Chairman Norman Wright. "We're very pleased he's joining our conservation family." ❐

ISDA MONITORING *cont. from Pg. 1*

Photo monitoring with a 3-foot square frame. Photo courtesy of Life on the Range.org.

Department of Agriculture visit with them about how to find range-monitoring locations that already have been set up by the BLM in the field, and how to take photos that fit established protocols agreed upon by ISDA and the BLM.

The first step is often visiting the local BLM office to check out the files for a particular grazing allotment to see how much photo-monitoring data exists and jot down the GPS coordinates for the monitoring point locations.

"The first step is to pull the information that's been collected and read the current assessment of their allotment," said Brooke Jacobson, range program manager for ISDA. "We look at goals and objectives for the allotment. We don't want to monitor just for monitoring's sake. Are we trying to manage for increased cover for sage-grouse? Increase forage for livestock? Do we want to look at the potential for range improvements?"

Regular photo monitoring provides information "so they know the health of their land and it allows them to manage for the sustainability of their operations," Jacobson says.

Guerry hired Ken Sanders, a retired University of Idaho range management professor, to do the monitoring on his grazing allotments following a schedule that they worked out with BLM staff. "I think the agreement with ISDA and the BLM is a giant leap forward for getting annual monitoring going at a larger scale," Sanders says.

It is challenging to get ranchers to take the time to learn the process, but it's definitely worthwhile, Sanders and Jacobson say.

Guerry agrees. "It's a lot of valuable data if we get challenged by some group that might question whether we are doing a good job of managing the range."

Bruce Mulkey, a Salmon-based rancher, said he was shocked when he looked at the BLM files on the grazing allotment where his cattle graze. "They hadn't done any monitoring since the 1980s … that was pretty scary," he said. "It's pretty critical to get out and do it."

John Biar, a career rangeland specialist who retired from ISDA several years ago, was a key partner in creating the BLM-ISDA range-monitoring program in 2014. "What we wanted to do was find a tool that we could help the federal agencies with, in getting good monitoring data that would support the BLM and help in grazing permit renewal decisions," Biar said in a video and article published on LifeontheRange.org.

"Monitoring is important, I believe, because it's going to be the future of rangeland management in Idaho. The federal agencies are very short-handed due to budget reductions, their work loads are very significant, and they have more litigation than they've had in the past. They are our partners in land management."

Adds Biar, "For BLM, it gives them consistent, year to year, photo monitoring data. What that does, is captures the good years, the dry years, it captures everything that happens at these key sites going on out there. For the rancher, it helps the rancher keep and have their own data. They will have data that supports their ranching operation, their grazing management systems. It's a very cheap insurance policy for them when it's permit renewal time or their grazing permit is litigated."

University of Idaho extension professionals across southern Idaho have helped publicize workshops to increase participation. "I just think it's a great program," said Scott Jensen, University of Idaho Extension Educator in Owyhee County. "It provides ranchers with the tools they need to collect data – not only collect it, but have credible data so they can have that included in their allotment files and utilized in the whole decision-making process."

That is a key point, Jacobson says. The photo data that ranchers collect in the

ISDA MONITORING, *cont. on Page 3*

LINKS TO MORE INFORMATION

- UI Rangeland Center Article https://www.uidaho.edu/cnr/rangeland-center/projects/photo-monitoring
- ISDA Range Program website: https://agri.idaho.gov/main/animals/range-management-program/cooperative-photo-monitoring/
- Life on the Range video and story about the ISDA-BLM range monitoring program: https://idrange.org/range-stories/southwest-idaho/training-multi-agency-partnership-inspire-over-100-idaho-ranchers-to-engage-in-range-monitoring/

ISDA MONITORING, *cont. from Pg. 2*

field will become part of the public record. "The data that they collect will carry more weight than someone just taking a photo at the driest part of the grazing season," she said.

Nika Lepak, a Rangeland Management Specialist in the BLM State Office, said, "The MOU is valuable for BLM because we know that when a permittee is working with ISDA that they're following all the correct protocols for completing photo monitoring, and we know that they're doing that work over the lifespan of the grazing permit.

"And we also know they'll be submitting those photos on a regular basis."

Helping make sure that the BLM has good, current photo-monitoring data in their files is an important benefit for producers, Jacobson says. "There might be some instances where the BLM can only get out to take monitoring photos once every 10 years. If ranchers engage in the program, they can ensure that photo-monitoring files are taken once every one or two years to reflect current realities."

Ranchers practice taking photo monitoring pics as part of a workshop near McCall. Photo courtesy of Life on the Range.org.

Shannon Williams, a University of Idaho Extension Educator in Salmon, started a similar program in Lemhi County to help ranchers engage in photo-monitoring.

"I've been working here for 18 years, and I offered range-monitoring workshops two times a year," Williams says. "Everyone came and said, Yep, this is a really good idea. Yes, we need to do it. And then, after the workshops were over, nothing happened."

"So I decided, OK, I'm not going to hold any more workshops. If someone wants help with monitoring, they can ask for help, and I'll get them help."

Brooke Jacobson, manager of ISDA's range monitoring program, and her staff help ranchers monitor oftentimes remote rangelands.

Williams found some grant money and hired a season technician to help with the monitoring program. "Basically, I hired the ranchers a tutor," she said.

They follow the same procedure as outlined in the ISDA-BLM MOU, show them how to fill out the photo white boards, and how to take pictures of range plants with a frame on the ground.

One thing that's helping the ISDA-BLM program catch on is that ISDA has range staff located in Idaho Falls, Twin Falls and in Boise:

- Tyler Hamilton, Idaho Falls ISDA office, direct line: 208-557-4317
- Thad Strom, Twin Falls ISDA office, direct line: 208-807-9903
- Brooke Jacobson, 208-332-8561, and Austin Terrell, 208-332-8566 in the Boise ISDA office

"If people sign up, we will go out and help them get started," Jacobson says. "We come out to the field and meet with them, one on one, and help them understand how the program works."

After consulting the BLM files for the existing monitoring locations, it's almost like a scavenger hunt to find the monitoring locations, she notes. ISDA staff carries GPS units with them to help locate the monitoring point markers, which might range from a stick of rebar, to angle irons, or a potato digger bar, she says.

"Sometimes the markers are painted orange to help with visibility," she says.

But finding the markers is often the hardest part, and fortunately, it's a group effort with ISDA officials assisting in the field.

Once the locations are found, the ISDA-BLM protocols require the following information to be collected:

1. Fill out a photo board with pertinent information to be placed in all photos at the site
2. Place a 3-foot-square frame on

ISDA MONITORING, *cont. on Page 4*

ISDA MONITORING, *cont. from Pg. 3*

Jason Nettleton and another producer practice photo monitoring during the field portion of a range monitoring workshop. Photo courtesy of Life on the Range.org.

the ground and take a close-up photo of the vegetation in the frame.

3. Take landscape photos from existing BLM photo points from several different directions.

It typically takes one work day to collect photo monitoring data, once ranchers have been trained how to do the photo monitoring. Ranchers who are participating in the program schedule a day to collect the data at the same time each year. The photos tell a story over time, which can translate to range trends. Is the range improving? Are there noxious weed issues? Has the land been affected by wildfire? All of those things are important to document, Jacobson says.

Some producers are collecting data before grazing season and then after season, she said. Others are doing it once a year, during the spring green up period, to track trends with range plants, grasses and forbs, when the plants are in full bloom.

"The important thing is to be consistent in collecting the data so it's useful in determining range trends," she said.

In the LifeontheRange.org article, Gretchen Hyde, points out the value of having long-term range data. Her grandfather and father started collecting photo trend data in the 1970s. Hyde grew up on her family's Van Deusen Ranch in Emmett, where range monitoring photo points were set up long ago.

"Back in the 70s, my grandfather worked with Gus Hormay to set up a rest-rotation system, and at the same time, a monitoring program," Hyde explains. "Over the years, having that data, having those photos, we were able to impact some of the decision-making, because we knew more about how things were being impacted in a positive way.

My dad always said that it's a gift to the future. And having that data will be beneficial in the long term. Healthy lands equal healthy livestock. It's important for them to share the data and work together on that."

Adds Jacobson, "Producers need to see this as an investment. What a gift to give to the next generation on your ranch to have that long-term data."

For more information on the range monitoring program, please contact Brooke Jacobson or one of the ISDA staff closest to your ranch. Jacobson can be reached at 208-332-8561 or Brooke.Jacobson@isda.idaho.gov. ❒

Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.

IDAHO SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION

322 East Front Street, Suite 560 • Boise Idaho 83702 • P: 208-332-1790
F: 208-332-1799 • info@swc.idaho.gov • www.swc.idaho.gov

Conservation the Idaho Way: Sowing Seeds of Stewardship