

BACK TO THE FUTURE?



PARTNERS CONSIDER A RETURN  
TO THEIR ROOTS

# RETURN TO OUR ROOTS? IDAHO PARTNERS CONSIDERING IT

By Steve Stuebner

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Conservation Commission, and Idaho’s conservation districts are exploring ways to work together to implement the new Farm Bill and its conservation practices through greater collaboration at the ground level, beginning next year.

At a recent Board meeting of the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA), Teri Murrison, administrator of the Conservation Commission and NASCA’s Pacific Region Director, learned that other state conservation agencies have for years been working on Farm Bill program implementation with NRCS.

“When I got back from my NASCA Board meeting, I immediately called Curtis Elke, Idaho’s state conservationist for NRCS. He was excited about the possibilities of working more closely together,” Murrison said.

“He hasn’t hesitated to involve us before, and he didn’t hesitate when I brought this new Partnership idea forward,” she said. “The Commission and the Idaho Association of Conservation Districts’ Board are interested in the idea of working on Farm Bill programs with NRCS too. So as a next step, we’re reaching out to Idaho’s 50 conservation districts to gauge interest and ability to participate. Curtis and I are trying to figure out how we can get it done.”

Elke wants to see more conservation projects installed—voluntary projects on private

lands, farms, ranches, and forest land. He plans to budget \$8 million for NRCS-led conservation projects through a process of identifying and prioritizing resource concerns to be recommended for federal funding. He hopes to add up to 30 new conservation planners and engineering technicians to assist with customer demand for conservation programs. If the proposed agreement goes forward, he’s willing to spend up to \$1 million on personnel, enabling districts that can provide 25 percent financial and/or in-kind match (personnel, goods, or services related to implementing Farm Bill programs) in FY 2021.

Murrison and Elke call the potential cooperative effort a Return to the Roots of Idaho’s long-standing conservation partnership.

NRCS, the Conservation Commission and Idaho conservation districts have been working together since the 1940s to help farmers and ranchers pay for projects to reduce soil erosion, offer research-proven technologies



*After the Dust Bowl, local, state, and federal governments started working together to address what were at the time common farming practices that contributed to erosion.*



*Hugh Hammond Bennett, father of the soil conservation movement in the U.S. Photo courtesy of NRCS.*

and solutions, improve water quality and aquifer recharge methods, and more.

The NRCS has been under staffing caps since 2016. Congress has continued to fund the Farm Bill, from which NRCS derives USDA program funding. But the agency has been short on conservation professionals who help assist landowners by prescribing voluntary conservation practices that work best for the landowner and the land.

“We want to do what’s right for the people on the land,” said Elke. “By working together, we can do so much more.”

Under the new agreement that NRCS and the Conservation Commission are considering, each conservation district in Idaho would be eligible to receive additional funds dedicated to paying for conservation planners to work on Farm Bill programs.

Other USDA conservation programs would be available to districts including the:

- Conservation Stewardship Program
- Conservation Technical Assistance
- Agriculture Conservation Easement Program

- Regional Conservation Partnership Program
- Conservation Reserve Program

A single district could receive funding or multiple districts could band together to plan and implement projects for NRCS, Elke said.

“The beauty of it is we’re encouraging districts to help us develop more projects to implement the Farm Bill and install conservation projects on the ground where they make the largest impact,” he said.

Conservation planners could be hired full-time, part-time or on contract with the NRCS funds, he said. Elke plans to rely on 17 locally led work groups statewide to identify and prioritize local natural resource concerns, looking at watershed-scale regions and boundaries for implementing conservation projects.



After the restoration, beavers helped reclaim wet meadow habitat.

“We’re looking to expand and diversify locally led work groups with multiple agricultural interest groups representing the true needs of the Idaho landscape and people,” he said. “It’d be great if we could be thinking strategically about what’s really needed on the landscape and take an all-hands, all-lands approach. We have the partnerships in Idaho to make this happen.”

So, if districts are interested and qualified, Murrison, Elke, and an ad hoc advisory partnership committee, will craft a new proposed Memorandum of Agreement to facilitate the flow of funds to districts to hire conservation planners and engineer technicians. The new arrangement will require legislative approval in the 2020 session.

Norman Wright, chairman of the Commission, and Steve Becker, president of the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts and chairman of the Nez Perce Soil and Water Conservation District, see promise in the arrangement.

“If we can come to agreement on the details, it looks promising. Other states are working out similar agreements with NRCS now to help implement Farm Bill programs,” Wright said. “Given the interest in these programs and NRCS’ perpetually heavy workload, it seems to be the wave of the future for NRCS.”

“I think they can get it figured out. I don’t think any challenges will be insurmountable,” Becker adds. “I think it’ll be good for landowners, NRCS, and the districts that sign on. More money to hire more people to get more done benefits us all.”

Wright encourages district boards, staff and landowners to begin thinking about participating. “I think there are a lot of opportunities out there,” he said. “Every district and local NRCS office knows what the needs and opportunities are, but the programs offered has been slowed down by our lack of staff to develop conservation plans and put the projects on the ground. Without those people, a conservation



Farm Bill programs can be used to restore streams by adding riffles and pool structures.

project is not going to get out of the starting blocks.”

In talking to some Cassia County supervisors, Wright learned that they were planning to band together and come up with matching funds to hire an employee to help NRCS with their workload. “That was great to hear,” he said.

Wright encourages other districts to begin discussing how they could match NRCS funding to hire one or more conservation planners to implement projects. Elke said he would provide office space where available in existing NRCS county offices for additional conservation planners.

**History: Dust Bowl drove the foundation of original partnership**

Twenty years into his career, the late Hugh Hammond Bennett wrote “Soil Erosion: A National Menace” in 1928. In the 1930s, after the Dust Bowl swept the nation, people finally listened. Bennett convinced Congress to form the Soil Erosion Service, the forerunner to the Soil Conservation Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, to work with local farmers and ranchers to prevent soil erosion.



*Farm Bill programs were used to plant trees after the Clearwater Complex Fire.*

Environmental Quality, and other projects.

After the Idaho Legislature reduced state funding and personnel for agricultural water quality projects during the recession, the lion’s share of funding for voluntary agricultural stewardship on private lands has been provided and administered by NRCS.

In addition, NRCS has taken on new partners – NGOs, for example, Pheasants Forever, Trout Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy – the University of Idaho, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management,

and the Idaho Department of Lands. Elke said NRCS has approximately 100 agreements with various partner agencies and NGOs. If Idaho conservation districts participate in a new umbrella agreement through the Commission, “we will only get more accomplished for the good of our Idaho customers,” he said.

The traditional four-way partnership of the NRCS, the Commission, districts and landowners can only be strengthened by getting on-the-ground conservation projects implemented around the state, Elke and Murrison said.

**NRCS personnel limitations**

In the last few years, NRCS has been challenged to fill conservation planner positions because of a hiring freeze. As a result, Elke has been looking to many different partners for help. The Conservation Commission, a few individual districts, and others have already hired staff to work in NRCS offices on Farm Bill implementation. With the advent of a

A North Carolina-based soil scientist, Bennett is now known as the father of the soil conservation movement in the United States. He was the Soil Erosion Service’s first director.

In his quest to change common farming practices at the time, Bennett went to a number of states including Idaho, and convinced state legislatures to join the federal government by establishing state and local agencies to help.

In 1939, Idaho passed the Soil Conservation District Law, establishing the Conservation Commission. The Commission’s mission at the time was to help form local conservation districts. The Latah District came first, now there are 50. The Commission estimated that nearly half the state, or 27.2 million acres, were suffering from soil erosion at the time.

All three local, state, and federal agencies worked closely for years to help landowners improve management and adopt best management practices to reduce soil and water erosion. But over time, as the part-



*Ada Conservation District President Glen Edwards with a no till drill, technology that can be funded through Farm Bill programs.*

ners got things done, they began to work more independently on other issues, such as addressing non-point source pollution from agriculture through TMDL (Total Maximum Daily Load) water-quality clean-up plans for rivers across Idaho, Section 319 grants from the EPA/Idaho Department of

new agreement, those will be allowed to sunset.

According to preliminary negotiations between Elke and Murrison, this is how the new agreements are intended to work:

- Reframing the partnership (going back to roots): These three co-equal agencies, at three different levels of government, share and work toward one unified goal – more boots-on-the-ground conservation in the right places where the customer demand warrants it.
- How the contract may work: The Conservation Commission would facilitate a new partnership agreement with NRCS, engaging local conservation districts to help implement Farm Bill programs -



*Low Elevation Spray Application (LESA) irrigation systems can be installed through Farm Bill programs. LESA systems need less pressure to operate properly and drops are spaced 5 ft or less apart.*

### Benefits of a New Agreement

A higher level of service to customers would be provided by the Partnership.

More Farm Bill-eligible conservation projects would be implemented in Idaho.

Districts would provide in-house assistance to NRCS for projects using Farm Bill programs prioritized in the region by Local Working Groups.

Locally-led conservation and conservation districts would become more relevant.

Local Working Groups would be revitalized and strengthened across the state, providing important recommendations to NRCS' state conservationist.

conservation projects that meet NRCS guidelines. NRCS would enter into a multi-year series of one-year contracts with the Commission, providing funds for districts to be disbursed via subcontracts between the Commission and each district or groups of districts. Elke and Murrison are exploring the feasibility of some funding going to cover at least a portion of districts' and the Commission's overhead and reporting costs. The proposal at present does not include these.

- Contract details: Contracts between the districts and the Commission would specify compensation, detail in-kind match to be delivered, identify resources, and describe deliverables. The Commission and subcontracting districts would be accountable to NRCS for meeting the contract goal and Agreement expectations.
- Personnel issues: It's envisioned that approximately 20-30 conservation planners and technicians (combined) could be hired statewide. Hiring and firing

would be the responsibility of the districts. The positions would not be available to districts to work on separate district, non-Farm Bill projects – they would work full time on implementing USDA/ NRCS programs. NRCS would provide program direction, training, and day-to-day technical oversight of employees hired with grant funds. NRCS technical experts and engineers would oversee conservation planners' conservation projects.

- Expenditure of funds: The \$8M in funding would go toward planning and implementation of Farm Bill-eligible projects to farmers, ranchers and forest landowners through contracts and prescribed conservation practices. Up to \$1 million would be used to hire conservation planners and field engineer technicians. Locally led work groups, chaired by each IASCD Division Director, would prioritize focus areas, resource concerns to be addressed, coordination of projects to be considered, and leverage other available financial

and human resources, oversight and evaluation of outcomes.

- NRCS would provide office space and equipment in their county offices where space is available including computers, phones, vehicles, etc. NRCS also would provide training (likely in Idaho) for new conservation planners.

Elke is hoping the new agreement will help streamline the 9-step planning process currently used by NRCS for conservation projects. "Wouldn't it be great if there could be one plan used on all lands (private/public) for all conservation measures prescribed with the customer -- farmer, rancher, forest landowner -- in mind? he opined. "There's no time like the present."

"My vision in Idaho is to be the pioneer in conservation planning,"



Fencing is also funded by Farm Bill programs.



Farm Bill programs create defensible space and thin the forest around homes, following Firewise guidelines.

Elke said. "We are all visionaries. Every district knows what's needed on the landscape. If we can strive to see the invisible, we can achieve the impossible."

Elke used that last quote to wrap up a speech at a conference on "Working Lands for Wildlife" in Twin Falls recently.

Murrison also sees great potential in the proposed partnership with NRCS.

"Districts will have to figure out how to come up with the 25% in-kind match and the Commission has yet to completely assess the tremendous workload it would transfer from NRCS to us," Murrison said. "But we're hopeful. More Farm Bill dollars, more conservation planners and more conservation projects in Idaho benefits us all."

"When the partnership was founded, we worked together toward the same goal. This agreement could allow us

to return to our roots even as each partner – local, state, and federal - continues the independent and important work we're already doing. Stay tuned." □

Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way monthly.

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