

CELEBRATING 75 YEARS OF VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION IN IDAHO

Efforts represent multi-million investment in the state's environment, economy

The Idaho Soil & Water Conservation Commission hosted a spirited celebration of its 75th anniversary with a 30-minute program, a video and the presentation of special Arthur Snow conservation awards to legislative leaders on Wednesday, Feb. 12 on the fourth floor of the Idaho Statehouse. The celebration underscored the Conservation Commission's theme, "Conservation the Idaho Way," which heralds locally led, voluntary conservation projects that preserve natural resources on Idaho's private farm, ranch and forest lands.

With many of its partner agencies participating in the event, commission officials underscored the importance of the four-way partnership that leads to hundreds of boots-on-the-ground conservation projects every year. The value of those projects from all agencies combined exceeds \$38 million a year.

"Our farmers, ranchers and forest landowners care deeply about the land. With technical and financial support from the Commission, NRCS, local, state and other sources, Idaho's agricultural producers are making great strides," said Teri Murrison, administrator of the Conservation Commission. "They're doing it because they want to, not because they have to. It just doesn't get any better than that."

When the Idaho Soil & Water Con-

servation Commission was created by the Idaho Legislature in 1939, nearly half the state, or, 27.2 million acres were suffering from soil erosion. The Idaho Legislature created the Conservation Commission to work on setting up local soil and water conservation districts throughout the state and partner with the federal government and private landowners to address those soil-erosion issues.

At the 1940 organizational meeting of Idaho's first soil conservation district, the Latah District in Moscow, P.W. Harlow from Farmington said:

"I have been farming in this county for over 40 years and I know the need for soil conservation. ...there is severe erosion all over the county... especially in the last 10 days since this rain. For example, on an east slope of my land, the topsoil had just begun to thaw out a few inches when this rain came along at the wrong time and washed out all the soil that had thawed."

Not to be outdone, James Nelson of Kendrick added, "I have been farming even longer than Mr. Harlow. I've been farming for 50 years and can say right now that if soil loss continues as it has in the last few days, it won't be long before our land is in the same condition as part of China."

Agricultural and political leaders had



to work hard to sell the concept of forming local soil and water conservation districts. The concept was controversial. Latah County legislator Arthur Snow carried the bill that became the Idaho Soil Conservation District Law. He faced opposition in and outside the Statehouse, but eventually convinced colleagues to support the bill signed into law on March 9, 1939.

Snow's perseverance and support for voluntary conservation in Idaho "is mirrored by the group of legislators we honor today. We honor six men who, in the tradition of Arthur Snow, have made a difference for voluntary conservation in the Statehouse and in Idaho," said Commission Chairman H. Norman Wright.

SENATOR STEVE BAIR

Senator Bair from Blackfoot is the current chair of the Senate Agricultural Affairs Committee. Named chair in 2013, he quickly established himself as a friend to conservation districts, the Commission, and voluntary conservation. His farming background helped him see the need for proactive conservation. Senator Bair's leadership led to securing an additional \$60,000 for districts in FY 2014.

SENATOR BERT BRACKETT

Although he's gone on to chair the Senate Transportation Committee, Senator Brackett's work as the former chairman of the Senate Agricultural Affairs Committee distinguished him as a worthy recipient of the Arthur Snow award. Senator Brackett is a cattle rancher from Rogerson who understands and promotes voluntary conservation. His leadership and support during the 2009 Interim Committee was critical to both preserving and improving the conservation partnership.



Pictured from left to right: Chairman Norman Wright, Senator Steve Bair, Senator Bert Brackett, Representative Eric Anderson, and Representative Ken Roberts (ret.).

SENATOR JIM PATRICK

Senator Patrick in the fairly recent past was a key member of the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee (JFAC). He was then and is now a friend of agriculture and of voluntary conservation. Senator Patrick serves on the Senate Agricultural Affairs Committee. A farmer from the Twin Falls area, he's always had an attentive ear to the Commission and the voluntary conservation partnership.

REPRESENTATIVE ERIC ANDERSON

Representative Anderson's work to keep aquatic invasive species out of Idaho well-qualifies him for this award. His signature piece of legislation has been the creation of boat-inspection stations along major transportation routes to prevent the spread of zebra and quagga mussels into Idaho's lakes and rivers. The invasive mussels can be unwittingly carried from infected waters in other states via watercraft. Once established, the mussels proliferate exponentially and choke waterways and pipes, causing significant economic and environmental damage. Bonner, Oneida, Bruneau River, and Franklin conservation districts are part of efforts to stop the nasty hitchhikers. Rep. Anderson resides in Priest Lake and is a member of House Environment, Energy, and Technology Committee.

REPRESENTATIVE STEVE MILLER

A first term legislator, Representative Miller has proven himself politically adept, but he's by no means a newcomer to the world of voluntary conservation. From Fairfield, he's a board member of the Camas Conservation District, a past president of the IASCD, and an Idaho representative to the National Association of Conservation Districts. That experience makes him a tremendous advocate for conservation districts and conservation in general. He's a member of JFAC, the House Agricultural Affairs, and the Resources & Conservation Committees. He worked with Senator Bair in FY 2013 to secure the additional \$60,000 in district funding.



Rep. Ken Roberts (Ret.) accepts the Arthur Snow Legislative Award from Chairman Wright.

REPRESENTATIVE KEN ROBERTS (RET.)

Former Representative and current Tax Commissioner Ken Roberts was honored for his strong support while in the Legislature for conservation and the work of the voluntary conservation partnership. Commissioner Roberts' father was a conservation district supervisor in Donnelly. His work alongside Senator Brackett and others on the 2009 Interim Committee was critical to preserving and improving the conservation partnership. And though he moved on to the Tax Commission, he's continued his support for the partnership, most recently speaking at an IASCD division meeting. Roberts continues to run his farm in Donnelly.

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Chairman Wright noted that the four-way partnership established in the early days of the soil conservation movement is just as important today as it was then. The Conservation Commission, along with NRCS, local soil and water conservation districts, and private landowners works to implement hundreds of ag-related conservation projects every year. In addition, the the Governor's Office of Species Conservation (OSC), and other state agencies work with private landowners, state and federal partners to improve fish and wildlife habitat for the benefit of candidate, threatened or endangered species.

All told, the agencies invested more than \$37.9 million in boots-on-the-ground conservation projects in the

state of Idaho in 2013. These investments lead to spinoff jobs and positive local economic impacts throughout the state.



Investments in private land conservation help keep the state ahead of the curve when it comes to managing environmental concerns about water quality, soil erosion, wind erosion, ground water withdrawals, reducing nitrates leaching into ground water, and more, Wright said. "None of us can do this alone. It takes multiple partners, working together, to achieve our conservation goals."

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CONSERVATION WORK ON PRIVATE LANDS INCLUDE:

- \$32.4 million invested by the NRCS through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Stewardship programs. These funds represent more than 850 projects statewide. The federal funds have a local spinoff impact of \$17 million and created 375 jobs in 2013.
- \$4.4 million invested through the Governor's Office of Species Conservation, representing 86 conservation projects statewide.
- \$1.15 million invested in technical assistance, representing 7,681 hours of tech-help, to local soil and water conservation districts and private landowners by the Conservation Commission.
- \$2.4 million invested for habitat improvements to 79,320 acres of rangeland for sage-grouse, a candidate species, other wildlife species and livestock by the NRCS.
- Individual soil and water conservation districts such as the Nez Perce pool funds from multiple sources to work on conservation projects. In 2013, the Nez Perce district received funds from county government, donations, landowners, the state and more to compile a budget of \$948,000 to work on steelhead habitat improvements, riparian area restoration, streambank stabilization, soil quality assessments and more.
- Conserving ground water in the Snake River Plain through the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), saved 34,450 acre-feet of water, 68 million kilowatt-hours of electricity, and reduced soil erosion by 138,000 tons. The Conservation Commission lead management of this Farm Services Agency initiative by working with local landowners and coordinating with other state agencies.
- Reduced nitrate pollution to ground water in priority areas- 115,000 pounds of nitrates, 24,000 pounds of phosphorous and 137,000 pounds of sediment in 2013 involving 35,685 acres. This is a Conservation Commission initiative, working with local landowners.
- Since 1990, the Conservation Commission has issued \$24.9 million in low-interest loans to achieve conservation projects on 132,500 acres of land (many of them are irrigation efficiency projects). And it has completed 93 TMDL water-quality implementation plans statewide, with 17 more plans in the works for 2014.

Agency officials with the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality and the Idaho Department of Fish and Game commended the Conservation Commission and its partners for their achievements in private land conservation work.



Barry Burnell, Water Quality Administrator for DEQ.

“Implementing Idaho’s TMDL program involves many people and groups,” said Barry Burnell, water quality administrator for DEQ. “The Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission has led the effort in promoting voluntary conservation, and it has done a tremendous job in preparing TMDL plans so we can qualify for grants and funds to implement those plans. The Commission’s work has been the best of all of the designated agencies in charge of implementing TMDL plans. As a result, with the conservation districts’ assistance, Idaho’s surface water quality has improved for all Idahoans to enjoy.”

Added Virgil Moore, Director of Idaho Fish and Game, “The agricultural lands



Virgil Moore, Director of Idaho Fish and Game.

of Idaho that provide our food, fiber and fuel are also critical in preserving our wildlife populations and the state’s outdoor heritage. The Department recognizes and appreciates how important landowners are as stewards of wildlife habitat in Idaho.” □

...MORE FROM THE DAY IN THE CAPITOL



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Conservation the Idaho Way: Sowing Seeds of Stewardship