



Bear Lake District goes after weeds even in hard-to-reach places... on horseback.

BEAR LAKE DISTRICT TACKLES WATER QUALITY, FIRE SAFETY, WEEDS AND YOUTH EDUCATION

By Steve Stuebner

The Bear Lake Soil and Water Conservation District is busy with multiple conservation projects in the Southeast corner of Idaho, including fuel-reduction wild-fire-safety projects on the west side of the lake, battling noxious weeds, improving water quality and youth education outreach in the schools.

"We are staying busy trying to stay on top of all of the important conservation work over here in this beautiful corner of Idaho," says Jennifer Jenson, Chairwoman of the Bear Lake SWCD. Her family runs a dairy farm in the area. "We are grateful for our partners working together with us on fire safety, water quality, noxious weeds and youth education."

The Bear Lake District was successful in landing two grants in the \$250,000 range from the Idaho Department of Lands to reduce fuel loads and clear fire breaks in the Bear Lake West subdivision area. Bear Lake West lies just inside the Idaho border on the west side of Bear Lake next to U.S. Highway 89.

Homeowners in the Bear Lake West area were supportive of the projects designed to protect private homes and the subdivision from fire danger in the urban-wildland interface area, officials said. The IDL grants were mainly to create 100- to 300-foot-wide fire breaks in open space areas, officials said.

"The objective is to mow the vegetation and plant green strips," said Tyre Hol-

feltz, fire prevention and risk mitigation program manager for the Idaho Department of Lands. "If a fire occurs close to homes, we want to keep that fire close to the ground so we can catch it early and quickly before it goes into the crowns of trees."

The IDL grant project provides for a contractor running a masticator, which can chip up maple and oak vegetation and chip up the stems of the brush down to ground level. A contractor also mows sagebrush and other low-growing types of vegetation, and plants a "living green strip" of forage kochia, the same vegetation that the BLM has been using on fire breaks in the Great Basin, Holfeltz said.

The IDL grant work ties into fire safety work being done by the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service on adjacent lands, says Steve Howard, manager of the Bear Lake West Property Owners Association.

"We've got a lot of dead and down trees in the Dutch Canyon area on the southern boundary of our subdivision," Howard said. "We pulled all of that stuff out of there."

The subdivision has about 200 homes and 400 lots, he said. The Bear Lake West POA would like to see more projects occur in the future. "We told them where we'd like to do the treatments, and all of the work has turned out extremely well," he said.

"It did turn out well," added Brandee Wells, administrator of the Bear Lake District. "After we did that project, a lot of homeowners in the area are asking us to do another project for them."

Some people are worried about losing tree cover for shade or scenic views, Howard said, but the majority of homeowners are mainly concerned about preventing fires on the warmer and drier west slopes of Bear Lake. "We tell them they have two choices – you can have a pretty green strip, or blackened landscape," he said.

After the forests have been thinned and new plants sprout in the green strips, hardly anyone would know the work has occurred, Howard said.



Creating a fire break at Bear Lake West.

"People don't always understand what it means to reduce vegetation and maintain viewsheds," Holfeltz said. "We're working to prevent loss of life, property and structures, while addressing long-term resource concerns. Most fires in Idaho that damage structures are less than 1,000 acres in size."

It's also important to remember that 80 percent of Idaho's wildfires are human-caused. Besides the fuel-reduction work being done in the subdivision, individual homeowners are encouraged to adopt Firewise principles around their homes, reducing flammable vegetation around the home and thinning timber to create defensible space.

"We're also tying into project work in neighboring Utah communities like Garden City and the work on BLM and Forest Service lands," Holfeltz said.

The Bear Lake district is one of 17 cooperating agencies that IDL is working with on 42 fuel break projects statewide, representing more than \$13 million in fuels reduction work, he said.

The district has followed up with property owners in the Bear Lake area by sending out Firewise brochures and sharing information about fire safety with 2nd graders and 6th graders. For more information about the Idaho Firewise campaign, go to <https://idahofirewise.org>.

Water Quality Projects

The Bear Lake SWCD is working with professional water-quality specialist Chris Banks of Conservation Basics to implement several water-quality projects with Section 319 grants from the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality and the Environmental Protection Agency.

The projects involve working with three irrigation districts to improve irrigation diversions, partnering with five landowners to install off-stream watering systems, and a variety of fencing



The objective with the fuel breaks is to cut them 100-300 feet wide so firefighters would have an anchor point from which to fight a blaze threatening the nearby subdivision. (Photo courtesy Idaho Department of Lands)

projects and conservation improvements in livestock feedlots. Participating landowners are installing off-site water trough systems to help with local matching in-kind support, Banks said.

The Bear Lake Diversions Project will cost an estimated \$357,000, with a \$150,000 match and \$206,507 319 grant, he said.

The projects will improve irrigation efficiencies, including installing a pipeline to phase out an irrigation ditch that had major water leakage and water loss issues. He's also installing a new fish-friendly diversion on St. Charles Creek.

"The new diversion we're putting in on St. Charles Creek is the last one on the

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creek in the Fish Haven area,” Banks said. “The project benefits Bonneville cutthroat trout, a native species. At a bigger picture level, all of the irrigation diversion work we’re doing in the Bear River area is all to benefit Bonneville cutthroat trout.”

The Bear Lake Nutrient Reduction Project will cost an estimated \$387,000, with a \$154,800 match and \$232,200 in 319 grant funds, Banks said.

For that grant project, five landowners will be installing off-stream watering systems, planting windbreaks, converting open irrigation ditches to water pipelines.

The Bear Lake Water Improvement Project will cost an estimated \$261,470, with \$103,300 in matching funds, and \$158,170 in estimated 319 grant funds.

For that project, Banks will be working with five different landowners to install off-stream watering systems, relocate a small animal feeding operation, and install an updated irrigation mainline system.

That project includes moving a small animal feeding operation away from Georgetown Creek, fencing off the stream with 1,800 feet of fence, and creating off-site water for livestock, he said.

Banks has been working with the Bear Lake District for a number of years to make water-quality improvements. “The Bear Lake District has been very active in going after 319 grant funds and making water-quality enhancements in the watershed,” he said.

Annual field tours

The Bear Lake District hosts a field tour of conservation projects once a year in September. Usually about 30-50 people attend the tours, including conservation partners like Natural Resources Conservation Service officials and 4-H kids, Wells said. “The tours are open to the public. We typically go out and look at the projects we’ve done in the last year, including fuel-reduction projects and irrigation projects.

“As one incentive to attend the tour, we feed them a big BBQ dinner after we’re done.”

The Bear Lake District also works with adjacent counties in Wyoming and Utah to combat the growth of noxious weeds in the Bear Lake area. They participate with the other groups in the Highlands Cooperative Weed Management Area (CWMA), an area that transcends the state boundaries.

Stopping the spread of phragmites is one of the prime objectives in the wetlands around Bear Lake, Wells said. The reed is a perennial, aggressive wetland grass that out-competes native plants. Because of its height and its distinctive, fluffy seedheads, phragmites is easy to spot, even by traveling motorists.

“It’s looking better this year so far,” Wells said.

Eurasian Milfoil is another noxious weed that they try to keep under control. The Idaho Department of Lands has been working on that challenge. Eurasian Milfoil is an aquatic plant that lives in the water. “We have to dredge to get rid of that one,” she said.

Other major noxious weeds of note in the area include Dyers woad, leafy spurge, perennial pepperweed, and yellow toadflax. Other noxious weeds such as Canada and musk thistle as well as hoary cress also receive attention.

In the spring, the Bear Lake District hosts a spring tree sale for the community to raise scholarship funds for local high school kids. Trees for sale include fruit trees, conifers, shade trees and shrubs. Sales are open to the public to benefit the scholarship recipients.

If you live in the area and want a tree order form, visit <https://bearlakeswcd.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/tree-order-form-2021.pdf>

Education outreach with local schools

Each year, Bear Lake SWCD staff visits three elementary schools to talk to third-grade children and provide education about trees and conservation. The students learn about the value of trees to the environment and to society. They plant a tree at each school and give a seedling to each student to take home to plant in their yard, Wells said.

Bear Lake District staff also visits 6th graders once a year at a local junior high school. They talk to the kids about wildlife, soils and water quality, she said. The District also sponsors a conservation poster



2019 scholarship winners

er contest with the 6th grade students. The top 3 poster winners receive a cash prize and advance to a regional divisional contest. If the students do well at the divisional level, they can advance to the statewide poster competition. “We have had some of our students go to the state level,” Wells said.

Following the spring tree sale, the Bear Lake District provides scholarships to graduating seniors of Bear Lake High School. “We usually give away about 10 scholarships,” she said.

Most scholarships involve a \$100 cash award, and the first-place winner receives \$500.

Scholarship applications are due by April 30, 2021. Scholarship application form: <https://bearlakeswcd.files.wordpress.com/2021/01/scholarship-2021.pdf>

Winners of 2020 scholarships were: Aubrey Kearn, Cody Olson, Corbin Spencer, Elisabeth McDowell, James Alleman, Jimi Lloyd, Josi Kelsey, Kaitlyn Skinner, Lacey Lancaster, Macey Mattson, McKaylee Sellers, Riley Hayes, Kyle Skinner, Shaylee Phelps, Shaylynn Passey, Shon Damion Weachtler and Victoria Glead, according to the Bear Lake SWCD web site.

For more information about the Bear Lake District, go to <https://bearlakeswcd.wordpress.com> or contact Brandee Wells at bl.swcd@gmail.com.

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

ABOUT BEAR LAKE CONSERVATION DISTRICT

The Bear Lake Soil and Water Conservation District was the first District to be organized under the authority of the Idaho Soil Conservation District Law of March 1, 1939. The major resource related problems that existed at the time were poor irrigation application due to irregular field surfaces, lack of adequate control structures in most irrigation facilities, low forage production on poorly-drained bottomlands, lack of adequate equipment and funding to rectify these issues, and a shortage of irrigation water after mid-summer. In the 80 years since, the District has made significant accomplishments in these areas.

The District covers all of Bear Lake County in the southeastern corner of Idaho. Its total surface area is 668,160 acres. Major land uses include irrigated cropland (7.3%) and meadow hayland (13%), non-irrigated cropland (14%), forest and range (53.5%), the Bear Lake Wildlife Refuge, municipalities and farmsteads (3.4%), and water surface (8.8%). It contains approximately 45,000 acres of wetlands. Over 290,000 acres are federal lands (43.5%).

Current trends impacting conservation in the District are urban sprawl, tourism, alternative power generation, mining, Sharptail Grouse, planning and zoning practices, Bonneville Cutthroat Trout, Sage Grouse, fire prevention, and access to affordable fuels. They attempt to address these with active education and outreach programs to the public, legislative and local government officials, and involvement in local planning and zoning issues that impact natural resources. They are involved in mapping and eradicating noxious weeds with the local weed management agency (Highlands), annually put on tours, sponsor fair booths, and

much more.

District Supervisors have identified water quality (implementing incentive-based Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) projects as a way to reduce sediment and nutrients in area streams, and quantity (increasing irrigation efficiency and water savings) as their top priority, followed closely by improving soil health. Also priorities are rangeland, pasture, and non-irrigated cropland improvements such as offsite water facilities, cross fencing, rotational grazing, pest management, and reducing sheet and rill erosion. Wildfire in area woodlands is an increasing concern and the District is actively promoting fuels management to address that.

Other priorities include outreach and education on all of the above, fish and wildlife issues and concerns, and dealing with an increasingly urbanized interface. The District is pursuing conservation measures in conjunction with urban development and working with local land use planning authorities to direct growth/development in the county.

The District's projects planned, coordinated, and managed include:

- Bear Lake CD Diversions, Bank Stabilization
- Bear River Nutrient Reduction (319)
- Bear Lake Water Improvement (319)
- Williamson Fuels Reduction
- Highlands Cooperative Weed Management Area
- 6th Grade Outreach Program
- ECC Grants
- Scholarships
- Tree Sales
- Elementary School Tree Planting
- Fuels Reduction Grants
- Soil Health Workshops
- Bag of Woad

Funding sources for District Operations and projects include:

State of Idaho

- Conservation Commission
- Department of Lands

- Department of Agriculture (ISDA)
- Department of Fish and Game
- Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)

Bear Lake County

- Weed Control Department
- Fire Department

Grants

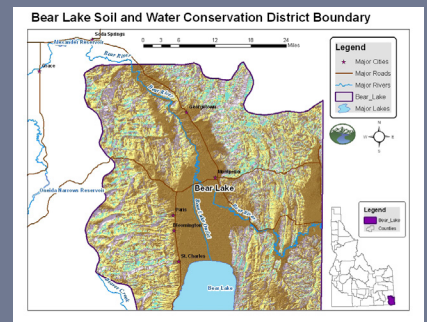
- PacificCorp
- Idaho DEQ
- Western Fire Managers
- US Forest Service

Cities

Highlands Coordinated Weed Management Area

- ISDA
- Upper Blackfoot River Consortium
- Trout Unlimited

Annual Tree Sales



Supervisors

Jennifer Jensen, Chair; Devin Boehme, Todd Lloyd, Mark Parker, James Hardcastle

Staff

Brandee Wells, Mgr. of Operations, Chirs Banks and Shawn Banks, Water Quality Resource Conservation Consultants

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