



Students from North Idaho schools learn about aquatic plants and bugs at the Pend Oreille Water Festival.

BONNER DISTRICT STAYS BUSY WITH EDUCATION EVENTS, WATERCRAFT INSPECTIONS AND MORE

By Steve Stuebner

The Bonner Soil and Water Conservation District, based in Sandpoint, is one of the most active districts in the state, putting on two major education events each year – the Idaho State Forestry Contest and the Pend Oreille Water Festival – while also operating three invasive species boat inspection stations, selling trees and working on water-quality improvements.

“We’ve got a lot of good things going

on with those education events,” said Dale Van Stone, chairman of the Bonner SWCD who has served on the district board of supervisors for 35 years. “The Forestry contest and the Water Festival are great educational opportunities for the kids in our communities.”

The Bonner District’s annual tree sales for small landowners, forest management groups and area loggers are popular, Van Stone said. “We try to be there for our landowners.”

The District provides approximately 140,000 coniferous tree seedlings each year, including western larch, western white pine, ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, Engelmann spruce, western red cedar and lodgepole pine. The tree seedlings are available for sale online on the Bonner District web site.

Participation in both the Forestry contest and the Water Festival were reduced this year because of COVID-19, said Sarah Garcia, Bonner District administrator, but at least the



Watercraft inspection experts clean a boat at one of Bonner SWCD's three inspection stations. (Courtesy Bonner SWCD)

participating school kids benefitted from in-person learning.

Thirteen area schools participated in the Forestry Contest, co-sponsored by the Idaho Department of Lands. The event was held this year at the Wood Wizard Tree Farm in Rathdrum as well as Pine Street Woods in Sandpoint. In a typical year, 600 school kids participate in the competition in different divisions for age groups – 6th graders, middle school students and high school students.

This year, about 130 school kids from Avery, Cottonwood, Spirit Lake, Post Falls, Priest River and Sandpoint schools, FFA's, and 4-H's participated. They study topics such as tree and plant identification, timber-cruising, compass and pacing, and log scaling in the classroom, and then go through education stations in the field on those topics, get briefed by a professional, and take a quiz.

"With a smaller group, there was a lot

more opportunity for questions and going back over what students might have missed in their exams," Garcia said.

"It was a different dynamic than what we're used to, but it was kind of neat for the students to have more quality time with the experts to ask them questions one-on-one."

The Pend Oreille Water Festival was held this year for the 25th year. The event was held at Riley Creek Campground on the Pend Oreille River. About 300 5th graders attended the two-day education event where students learned about water quality, watersheds, fisheries and fur trapping-era history.

In a normal year, Festival coordinator Gail Bolin goes into every 5th grade classroom prior to the Water Festival to talk to students about water. "I take a 10-foot by 10-foot map of the Pacific Northwest into the classroom, and talk about water and watersheds, and

how water flows under and over our lands, and how it's all connected," she said.

This year, it wasn't possible to speak to all classes ahead of time because

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in some schools, no outside speakers were allowed to visit classrooms.

Despite some cold and windy weather, the students enjoyed the Water Festival on May 20-21, Bolin said. The weather was windy and cold on May 20, but at least the rain stopped before the day's activities began.

"We all live in North Idaho; we know how to dress for cold weather," she said. "The kids were engaged; they were paying attention to learning. I thought it went very well."

Students from Sandpoint High School helped shepherd the 5th graders around to the different education stations, allowing them to break up into groups of 10 for more one-on-one learning, Bolin said.

They had 10' x 20' canopies set up at each education station to keep the kids out of the weather, she said.

INVASIVE SPECIES STATIONS IN BONNER COUNTY

Bonner SWCD manages three invasive species inspection stations in Bonner County – the Albeni Falls Visitors Center on U.S. Highway 2, the old Samuels weigh station on U.S. 95 North, and along Highway 200 in Clark Fork.

More than 700,000 watercraft inspections have been conducted in Idaho statewide under the Invasive Species program since 2009. The Idaho State Department of Agriculture oversees the program statewide. Through boat-inspections, 290 mussel-fouled boats have been intercepted in Idaho and cleaned before they were released so far. The overall message is "Clean, Drain Dry" your boat after you've had your boat in any waters contaminated by zebra mussels or quagga mussels, the primary focus of the program.

Glenn Kibbey, who coordinates the invasive species check stations for the Bonner District, said it was scary to learn earlier this year that pet stores were selling moss balls



Watercraft inspection employees clean a boat at a Bonner SWCD inspection station. (Courtesy Bonner SWCD)

from the Ukraine, home to the very invasive mussels that western states are trying to prevent from entering lakes and rivers. A February 2021 report indicated that the moss ball products were recalled and the U.S. Department of Interior recommended destroying the moss balls if any consumers had purchased them. The products were discovered in British Columbia and 21 U.S. states including Idaho.

"That could have been a disaster," Kibbey said.

The biggest challenge for the Bonner District so far this year is just finding enough seasonal employees to hire to work at the District's three inspection stations, he said. "It's been a challenge to hire seasonal people, just like it is for everyone else trying to hire right now," Kibbey said.

The Clark Fork inspection station sees a lot of watercraft traffic coming into Idaho from Montana, so there is potential for contaminated boats coming through from the east, he said. And the Albeni Falls station sees a lot of boat traffic from Spokane going to Priest Lake for the weekend, he said.

Boats coming to Northern Idaho from the south, via U.S. 95, often have been inspected at stations in Southern Idaho or in Utah, he said, but not all of them. Boats traveling

from mussel-infested waters such as Lake Mead, Lake Powell and Lake Havasu are common visitors to Idaho's inspection stations, officials said. Invasive quagga/zebra mussels have been found in Arizona, Nevada, Utah, California, and most recently in Montana waterways.

"We have to stay on our toes," Kibbey said. "Sometimes you get a wake board boat from Lake Powell and they've still got their bilge and water tanks full of water. So we drain the boat and do a hot-wash to ensure that we've eliminated all of the invasive mussels."

"These mussels have yet to be discovered in any Idaho waterbody and have not appeared in the Columbia River System to date," Bonner SWCD officials say on the web site. "But they are, no doubt, a very real threat that needs our full attention. If mussels were introduced to our waters, it would cost Idaho approximately \$100 million annually just to manage their impacts. Eradication would be very unlikely. These bivalves attach themselves to hard and soft surfaces and don't let go. Then they multiply at an exponential rate.

"Quagga/zebra mussels are gluttonous filter-feeders that eliminate phytoplankton, ultimately destroying the entire food web. Our fisheries



Bonner District and Kaniksu Land Trust volunteers assemble a new portable sawmill at Pine Street Woods. (Courtesy KLT)

here in North Idaho would suffer greatly and the quality of life we experience on our abundant lakes would change drastically," officials said.

Invasive mussels can multiply quickly, laying 1 million eggs per breeding event, and they can breed more than once a year, Kibbey said. "It would be an environmental disaster and a tourism disaster if we ever let those things take over our waters."

Boat inspection stations are open for expanding hours in 2021, providing boat-checks from dawn to dusk 7 days a week, from 5:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.

PORTABLE SAWMILL INSTALLED AT PINE STREET WOODS IN SANDPOINT

In another education project, the

Bonner District partnered with the Kaniksu Land Trust to purchase a portable sawmill for students to learn how wood products are made from timber in the conservation area.

Numerous volunteers helped assemble the sawmill over a weekend in October 2020.

Regan Plumb of the Kaniksu Land Trust described the event in an article for the Bonner County Daily Bee: "Over the course of a weekend, with some 70-plus hours of volunteer effort, three pallets loaded with thousands of pieces and parts, nuts and bolts, were converted into a shiny new mill with the capacity to saw 36-inch diameter logs into custom lumber," she wrote.

"The opportunities are endless. KLT and the Bonner District envision

milling everything from customer timbers to lumber for backyard building projects, all sourced from sustainably grown timber from Pine Street Woods. Workshops and guest lectures can be coordinated around mill operations, and byproducts such as wood shavings and offcuts can be offered up as firewood and chicken coop bedding."

Added John Gaddess, a Bonner District Supervisor, "The ability to demonstrate the entire conversion process from sustainably managed forest to a 2x4, and with so many educational opportunities along the way, is really remarkable."

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

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