



A contract operator trims a fuel break adjacent to a road in Clark County to reduce fire danger.

CLARK, MADISON DISTRICTS PARTICIPATE IN FUEL BREAKS COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

By Steve Stuebner

(In this month's feature story, we are sharing information about both the Clark and Madison Soil Conservation Districts.)

Local ranchers, landowners and the Clark Soil Conservation District officials were very concerned about the harmful impact of the 106,000-acre Grassy Ridge wildfire in 2018.

The fire burned up valuable native shrub-steppe habitat that provides a home to the greater sage grouse and big game animals, and it harmed rangelands that local ranchers depend upon for raising cattle and livestock. After wildfires, ranchers also must stay off public rangelands for a minimum of two growing seasons to allow the land to heal. That is always

a severe hardship for producers.

In response to the fire, Clark District officials worked together with 14 local farmers and ranchers, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) officials, Bureau of Land Management officials, Idaho Department of Lands officials, Pheasants Forever, conservation groups, Idaho Fish and Game, High Country RC&D officials and other groups to put together a plan on creating fuel breaks along county roads to hopefully prevent another major wildfire from occurring in the area.

The native sagebrush habitat in Clark County is considered to be some of the best sage grouse habitat in the state of Idaho, plus the range is crucial for livestock grazing and other wildlife

species.

"We put together a pretty good group and plan," said Richard Savage, a local rancher and a Clark SCD supervisor. "It always takes longer when you have a lot of different interests at the table, but it turned out pretty well, I thought. The goal is to maintain our native rangelands and save our sage grouse and big game habitat."

Fuel breaks were sprayed with an herbicide on 150 feet on either side of the county roads such as Red Road, Sand Creek Road, and many miles of two-track primitive roads. The areas lie north of the St. Anthony Sand Dunes and immediately to the east of the fire perimeter of Grassy Ridge Fire.

Now, a contractor is mowing the fuel breaks to keep vegetation close to

the ground so if a wildfire does occur, firefighting crews can use them as safety zones, access points and anchor points for suppressing a wildfire. The objective is to create about 103 miles of fuel breaks, or treat about 4,400 acres of land along roadways.

The Clark District has been involved by providing technical assistance on the project and recruiting landowners to participate.

“The fuel breaks are there to provide a fire line and access for equipment to be in a position to fight the fires,” adds Jacob Northuis, a partner in the collaborative group who works for Pheasants Forever. “We saw what happened on the west side, and we don’t want to see it happen over here on the east side of the high desert.”

The fuel breaks project is also part of the new Cheatgrass Challenge initiative, led by NRCS in Idaho along with a host of many partner state and federal agencies and conservation groups. The initiative is taking an “All Hands, All Lands” approach so the same prescription and strategy for projects like the fuel breaks can be applied across private, state and federal land boundaries, officials said.

“It’s a collaboration to work across the whole landscape,” Northuis said.

Background on Clark and Madison Districts

The Clark District was formed in 1950, the Madison District in 1948. Ranching and livestock are a high priority for the Clark District, which is located high in the upper valley of Eastern Idaho next to the Montana border. In the Madison District, centered in the farm country surrounding Rexburg, district support for irrigated and dryland farming are a high priority.

According to its FY 21 annual report, the Madison District has been engaged in the following:

- The Madison County Health Soil Initiative project assists farmers in



The Grassy Ridge fire consumed native sage-steppe habitat and crucial habitat for greater sage grouse. The fuel breaks project is intended to prevent another large fire in the area (photo courtesy East Idaho News).

improving soil health through such practices as cover crops, no-tillage/ minimum-tillage, variable rate irrigation and variable rate fertilizing.

- “High tunnel” greenhouse projects, funded by NRCS.
- Working to reduce tillage, with Soil Health practices applied to 1,846 acres of farmland.
- Cover crops were used on 2,814 acres assisting landowners to reduce wind erosion and improve soil quality and crop production.
- Chaired a local working group (LWG) involving four conservation districts and over 30 conservation partners to develop conservation funding priorities for the area.
- Hosting an annual conservation tour that highlights conservation efforts in Madison County and Eastern Idaho.
- Sponsored students from Hibbard and Burton elementary schools to attend a “Birth of a River” trip to Big Springs, the source of the world-renowned Henrys Fork River. The

trip educated the students about the importance of water as a natural resource, officials said.

- Providing administrative assistance to the NRCS in its conservation outreach work to farmers and ranchers.

According to the FY 21 annual report, the Clark District has been working on the following projects:

LOW INTEREST LOANS FOR IDAHO SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION

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- Sprinkler Irrigation
- No-Till Drills
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Students visited Big Springs and Mesa Falls to learn about the “Birth of a River,” an education field trip.

- Conservation poster contest for 5th and 6th graders at Clark Junior High.
- Annual conservation tour of local projects.
- Supporting Clark Junior/Senior High with a greenhouse project.
- Providing administrative assistance to the NRCS in its conservation outreach work to farmers and ranchers.
- Stockwater pipelines and water trough projects.
- Brush management.
- Working with the BLM, IDL and Camas Rangeland Fire Protection Association to stop fires when they're small using the resources of local ranchers and the RFPA.

Camas Rangeland Fire Protection Association (RFPA)

The Grassy Ridge Fire was a real motivating factor to create the Camas RFPA and stop fires from turning into huge conflagrations, Savage says. “There was a lot of grief about that fire. People were mad.”

As an active member of the Idaho Cattle Association, Savage heard a lot of positives from other ranchers involved in RFPA's elsewhere in Idaho.

“I’d been going to all of these meetings about RFPA's, and I thought

we ought to have one in Clark County,” he said. “Our conservation board took that up, and it took a couple of years to get traction. It’s a good outfit now.”

Several wildfires were stopped in the past summer by Camas RFPA ranchers, he said. “It seems like half of them start from the road. Whoever gets there first, takes care of it. It’s working pretty well.”

The Camas RFPA works closely with the county, IDL and the BLM, he said. The Camas RFPA owns one Type 6 firetruck, and then local ranchers provide their own equipment such as tractors, loaders, water trucks, etc., to help fight fires.

“There’s lots of good people involved,” Savage said. “Everybody’s doing what they can.”

Back to Fuel Breaks

Funding for the fuel breaks project totals about \$167,800 to date, according to Kim Ragotzkie, who is tracking project finances for High Country RC&D. The funding includes contributions from BLM Community Fire Assistance grant funds, IDFG, IDL, NRCS, and the Governor’s Office of Species Conservation. About 20 agencies and organizations already have contributed to the project, including investments in post-fire

rehabilitation work accomplished in the aftermath of the Grassy Ridge Fire.

About 3,475 acres will be treated over multiple years. If all goes as planned in 2021, they hope to mow an additional 860 acres of fuel breaks. It may take one or two more years to complete the rest of the mowing, officials said.

Some of the funding came from the Cheatgrass Challenge project because the herbicide spraying activities are helping reduce the spread of cheatgrass in the treated areas as well, officials said. Even though cheatgrass is dead and dormant in the fall, the herbicide has an impact on next year’s crop of cheatgrass as a “pre-emergent,” Northuis says.

The herbicide is applied in the fall and soaks into roots of cheatgrass seeds and plants, suppressing growth in the winter and spring, he said. “The idea is to stop it before it can emerge.”

Savage, other Clark District supervisors and former State Senator and sheep rancher Jeff Siddoway all have been helpful in recruiting landowners to participate in the project, officials said.

“They worked really hard to make sure that we had everybody on board with the fuel breaks project,”

Ragotzkie said.

Pheasants Forever is concerned about protecting the sage grouse habitat in the high desert and conservation values, Northuis said. "We're super excited about the fuel breaks project. We're all on board with trying to prevent these large project fires from happening again, so to have a plan in place is huge. The high desert habitat for sage grouse, wildlife and livestock grazing is absolutely invaluable from Kilgore to St. Anthony and Dubois."

Northuis said he saw 75 sage grouse on a single day of bird hunting in that area last fall to give readers an indication of the value of the area for sage grouse. The same zone is a favorite area for falconers to hunt sage grouse with trained birds of

prey as well as avid bird hunters from Eastern Idaho.

On the education front, Madison district officials also have been talking to school kids about the importance of being safe with campfires, shooting practice areas and other areas to avoid man-caused fires south of U.S. 20 in Eastern Idaho, said Greg Blaser, a Madison District supervisor.

Seeing a major increase in public use of the outdoors during the covid era, plus an increase in visitors to Yellowstone National Park, there seems to be more litter at camping areas, careless shooting activities, and human-caused fires, he said. Each year, about 80 percent of the wildfires in Idaho are human-caused.

"The human-caused fires are the ones we're trying to stop with a little education," he said. "If we get the word out to the kids, hopefully they can go home and talk to mom and dad about that stuff. So far, it's working out pretty good."

Blaser also was involved in the Madison District's "Birth of the River" education outreach project with Hibbard and Burton schools. "There were at least 100 kids involved," he said. "The tours turn out really nice. Seeing the crystal clear source of the Henrys Fork, they gain a real appreciate for the value of water."

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

A MESSAGE FROM DELWYNE TREFZ NEW SWC ADMINISTRATOR



Delwyne and his mountain dog, Scout, on Mt. Borah.

Since being appointed administrator of the Idaho Soil & Water Conservation Commission in August, my professional life has been an absolute whirlwind! And I'm absolutely enjoying it!

When Teri Murrison announced her retirement, I knew she would be leaving big shoes for someone to fill. I didn't realize how large until I was actually appointed!"

As we forge ahead to take on new opportunities and challenges, I want you to know that my staff and I are 100% committed to providing Idaho Conservation Districts with top-shelf customer service. We will engage with current and potential partner entities to advance voluntary, non-regulatory natural resource conservation in Idaho.

Please, don't hesitate to give me a call or drop me an email or text whenever you have a comment, concern, or great idea for how we can work together to serve the conservation needs of Idaho landowners.

- Delwyne Trefz delwyne.trefz@swc.idaho.gov

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