Conservation the Idaho Way

IDAHO SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION

MARCH 2023



The Oneida District manages the Malad Invasive Species watercraft inspection station on I-15 near the Utah border. Boats often come from Lake Powell, fouled with invasive zebra or quagga mussels. (photo courtesy Oneida SWCD)

ONEIDA DISTRICT GUARDS AGAINST INVASIVE MUSSELS, WORKS ON SOIL HEALTH & CONSERVATION

By Steve Stuebner

ISSUE 117

The Oneida Soil and Water Conservation District provides one of the Idaho's strongest lines of defense against the invasion of exotic quagga and zebra mussels by overseeing the Malad watercraft inspection station on Interstate 15 near the Utah border.

The Malad station averages about 8,500 inspections per year, and in most years, employees catch approximately half of the boats fouled with invasive mussels entering Idaho from infested waters in Utah and Arizona. Check station employees do a pressurized 140 degree F hot wash on site and remove all invasive mussels from the boats.

"We have one of the highest inspection-to-catch ratios in the state," said Staci Tripp, District Administrator for the Oneida Soil and Water Conservation District. "We get a lot of the snowbirds coming back north from spending a winter down south."

In 2022, the Oneida District discovered invasive mussels in 16 out of 36 contaminated boats statewide, according to the Idaho Department of Agriculture, which oversees Idaho's Invasive Species Program. Most of the fouled boats at the Malad station came from either Lake Powell, Utah, or Lake Havasu, Ariz.

Since 2009, more than 950,000 inspections have occurred at the Idaho's watercraft inspection stations statewide, intercepting invasive mussels in 377 fouled boats. So far, no invasive mussels have been detected in Idaho's pristine waters.

The solution is to CLEAN, DRAIN AND DRY your boat after leaving rivers, lakes or reservoirs infested with invasive quagga and zebra mussels, according to ISDA.

Overseeing the Malad watercraft

inspection station is one of the major projects that the Oneida District manages each year. The District also has been working with producers on a new Soil Health initiative, specifically cover crops. It acquired two No-till drills as part of a §319 grant from the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality and Environmental Protection Agency.

In addition, the District has been working on an off-stream stockwater conservation project with landowner Don Buehler on Wright Creek. The District also provides education outreach in the local schools.

"Malad is one of our crucial corridors for watercraft inspection," says Nic Zurfluh, Section Manager of Invasive Species Coordination and Outreach for ISDA. "Malad continues to interact with high-risk watercraft coming out of the Lower Colorado, mainly Lake Powell.



Left, Don Buehler with his grandson, Jackson Buehler (courtesy Don Buehler). Right, a new water line is installed underground for the new stockwater system. (courtesy George Hitz, SWC)

"The Oneida District has been outstanding partner to work with for the program," Zurfluh says. "The District has been with us for many years. It operates the station efficiently because they are tied in closely with the local community."

The Malad watercraft inspection station opens in early March each year because of the number of boaters traveling north on the freeway from Utah, Arizona or other locations.

Dallas Keller, who worked at the Malad station for 13 years, said the boaters "come from all over. ... All 50 states, really. But many do come from Arizona, Utah and Nevada."

People are trailing house boats, water ski boats, surf boats, sail boats, fishing boats, whitewater rafts – just the whole gamut, Keller says.

"Most people are good about stopping, but you get some who say, this is stupid, why do we have to stop?" she says. "And we say because if you've been boating on Lake Powell, Lake Mead or other infested waters, their boat will have a mussel or two on board."

Inspectors work at the Malad station

for 18 hours from 6 a.m. to midnight, 7 days a week. The District has two employees manning the station at all times, sometimes three during busy holidays.

"It's a good opportunity in my opinion as far as the job goes," she says. "It's not that hard, and you get to meet people from all over the world, and sometimes, make new friends. The employees range from college students to retirees."

Buehler Ranch conservation project

The Oneida District partnered with local producer Don Buehler on a stockwater conservation project along both sides of Wright Creek on the Buehler Ranch. The project was funded by a §319 grant from the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Working with Chris Banks of Conservation Basics, Buehler developed a natural spring on one side of the creek to pipe water to stockwater tanks. One the other side of the creek, they drilled a well and piped water to series of stock tanks. The purpose of the project is to give cattle a place to drink water away from Wright Creek. The stream already has been protected with a post-and-pole fence installed by a local 4H club. Once the stockwater system is operational this spring, it will allow the cattle to drink clean water from the tanks.

"We worked on getting the water system installed before winter came, and we got it done just in time," he said.

Wright Creek is on the 303(d) list of

LOW INTEREST LOANS FOR IDAHO SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION



degraded waters in the state. Streammonitoring in the future will track progress on improving water quality.

Buehler leases his ranch ground to another producer who runs 80 cattle in the area, he said. The conservation work is expected to improve water quality in Wright Creek by reducing sedimentation and temperature issues.

"We've got a little campground that seniors like to use by the creek," he said. "Members of the local LDS ward have a father's and son's campout in the area, too. It's a pretty little meadow and this project will keep it nice for people to enjoy."

Soil Health cover crop project

As part of the same §319 grant, the Oneida District worked on Soil Health outreach with local farmers and ranchers, including some no-till demonstration projects, the purchase of a no-till drill and the purchase of a range drill.

"The Oneida No-till project will work toward educating and showcasing to farmers and ranchers of Oneida County the positive impacts of No-till farming," the §319 grant application said. "The project will work to enhance soil health, reduce soil erosion, and reduce mechanical impacts to farmland in Oneida County."

Banks said that Oneida SWCD has been working closely with Natural Resources Conservation Service officials on the initiative and follow the NRCS Soil Health Initiative.

"We've got nine landowners signed up to do cover crops," Banks said. "We're getting people to try it. We're trying to get people to try new things."

Overall, the District plans to convert 150 acres of dryland, 150 acres of irrigated farmland, 100 acres of meadow, and 100 acres of range to No-till farming and ranching.

"The No-till project will serve as a pilot project to showcase to Oneida



Buehler worked with a local 4H club to install a post-and-pole fence along Wright Creek to keep livestock out of the riparian zone. (photo courtesy Don Buehler)

County farmers and ranchers the benefits of a no-till system, and how converting to no-till can improve their bottom line," Banks said in the §319 grant application.

The project will work to implement the use of cover crops in both farming and grazing rotations to generate better soil health and increase the production of grazed areas, he said. The project also will educate landowners how to incorporate different crop rotations into their current operations and schedules to increase soil health and promote outof-box thinking."

Oneida County has a lot of dry farms and grain production in the highelevation area. Local farmers often will use a barley, barley, barley rotation or a wheat, wheat, wheat rotation, and then maybe fallow the ground for a year before planting the next round of grain, or they might plant alfalfa as part of the rotation as well, Banks said.

When the dry farms get idled for season as part of a crop rotation, it's

an opportunity to plant a cover crop with a no-till drill, and then graze the lands when the cover crops are ready for grazing. Having an alternative to feeding livestock hay on the home farm/ranch is a bonus when hay is so expensive, Banks said.

"Hay has been really pricey this year," he noted. "If you can graze a cover crop and keep your livestock from having to feed on hay for 30 days or more, that'll save money."

Covering fields with a cover crop also reduces wind erosion and loss of topsoil. In the Soil Health project, special attention is being paid to highly erodible lands in croplands areas, specifically lands that contribute high levels of sediment into the Little Malad River.

No-till farming has other benefits for the producers in terms of the everincreasing expense of inputs such as fuel, equipment and fertilizer, Banks said. "The Oneida District is working to not only conserve the soil and natural resources, but a way of life. Through a reduction in inputs,



New Truax Range drill available for rent from the Oneida District. Contact Staci Tripp with the Oneida District for more information.

landowners will be able to realize cost savings," he said.

As part of the Soil Health project, producers will test the soil in fields, and see if things change over time, he said.

"We need to manage soils so they are sustainable for future generations," Banks says. "To do this, we need to remember that soil contains living organisms that when provided the basic necessities of life – food, shelter and water – perform functions required to produce food and fiber.

"Only living things can have health, so viewing soil as a living ecosystem reflects a fundamental shift in the way we care for our nation's soils," he said. "Soil isn't an inert growing medium, but rather teeming with billions of bacteria, fungi and other microbes that are the foundation of an elegant symbiotic ecosystem.

"Soil is an ecosystem that can be managed to provide nutrients for plant growth, absorb and hold rainwater for use during dryer periods, filter and buffer potential pollutants from leaving our fields, serve as a firm foundation for agricultural activities, and provide habitat for soil microbes to flourish and diversify to keep the ecosystem running smoothly," Banks said.

The Oneida District is looking for more producers to try no-till farming or using no-till drills to plant cover crops. The District now owns a 12-foot no-till drill and a 12-foot range drill. Both are available for rent.

How much does it cost to rent the drills? It costs \$30 per day, plus \$10 per acre. However, the Oneida District has cost-share money to incentivize producers to rent the drills. Producers who rent either drill can get a 60% reimbursement on seed, fuel and fertilizer, Tripp said. If landowners implement a Soil Health project on their own with their own equipment, they also would be entitled to a 60% reimbursement while the funds are available, she said.

Education programs

The District gives a \$1,000 scholarship every year to a graduating senior at Malad High School who intends on pursuing conservation-related courses or careers. The District also contributed \$2,500 last year to the new FFA/High School greenhouse for students to have more hands-on learning.

"We helped the Kindergarten last year finish a garden they started with grant funds," Tripp said. "They named it the "Kinder Garden."

Tripp is working on planning an Ag Expo in May for local students in partnership with University of Idaho Extension and FFA.

"Ag Expo will feature several educational stations including farm equipment and animals to teach the kids about agriculture," she said. The community will be invited to attend the event in the evening as well.

Within the Division 5 area, all of the conservation district administrative assistants, including Tripp, are active in attending the IASCD event at the Idaho Legislature in January.

"We meet with our area representatives and legislators and let them know what issues we have in our areas of the state. We also display project pictures to show them the work being done," she said.

For more information, contact Staci Tripp at 208-705-4880 or oneidaswcd@gmail.com

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