



SWC Commissioner Mitchel Silvers of Lewiston on the farm. (photo courtesy Sue Silvers)

MEET THE SWC BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS!

By Steve Stuebner

In this issue, we'd like to introduce all seven members of the SWC Board of Commissioners.

Many of them are new to the SWC Board. But they all are well-qualified with diverse backgrounds from all corners of Idaho. Five of them were appointed by Gov. Little in the last year.

Mitchel Silvers, Lewiston

Silvers is a new SWC Commissioner. He was appointed by Governor Little in February.

He lives on a farm near Lewiston with his wife, Sue.

Silvers has many years of experience in public service prior to joining the SWC Board of Commissioners. He worked as a natural resources aide

to U.S. Senator Mike Crapo for 19.5 years. He's also served on the Paris City Council, Winchester City Council, Bear Lake Regional Commission and Plummer-Worley Joint School Board.

What do you like about being a SWC Commissioner?

"Being able to support Idaho's Ag Industry and the rural communities that depend on a viable and profitable Ag industry, which supports their local schools and economies in the same traditions that has supported their families for generations."

Tell us about where you live.

"With my wife, Sue, we live in the Tammany Creek area just south of Lewiston. Much of the landscape is still rural Ag, which we enjoy and the reason for living outside of town. Our

oldest son, along with his family, live just down the lane from us. Together, we have 80 acres that are leased to a local farmer. I enjoy the seasons and watching the land being worked, growing food for not only our country but for other countries around the world."

Tell us about your current thoughts about ag conservation in Idaho?

"I've been fortunate to be involved and around agriculture through my working career and even now by being appointed to the SWCC. I've always thought that farmers and ranchers were some of the best land stewards and conservationists in Idaho. They know that they need to care for the land for long term sustainability of their Ag operations."

"Conservation is a part of today's farming practices and there will always be a reason or need for adopting and implementing changing practices. I remember as a teenager moving handline in wheatfields and alfalfa that in previous years were surfaced-watered. But for the most part, that was more efficient with the irrigation water that was available. Now, there are automated pivot systems and technology will continue to improve and provide new opportunities."

What do you see as some of the biggest needs/issues in the region you serve?

"Continuing to improve in-stream habitat for steelhead and salmon, along with other species of fish, is a priority for many and this includes replacement of undersized culverts with fish-friendly culverts that also can help reduce flooding and improve water quality."

"We need to improve water quality so we can meet water quality standards in some of the streams with concerns usually noted for sediment and phosphorus."

"Conservation programs that are voluntary and incentive-based with the landowner making decisions on what projects to implement are the best methods for caring for the land, water, and air."

Would you like to highlight any thoughts you have about recent trends with water quality or soil health/erosion in your region?

"I think the recent funding made available for the revived Water Quality Program for Agriculture (WQPA) of \$5 million in FY 2023, which provided funding for 48 projects statewide, was a huge lift for water quality and soil health conservation in Idaho. Those projects that were funded might otherwise have waited years for funding and implementation. I appreciate the Idaho State Legislature



SWC Commissioner Wendy Pratt at her ranch near Blackfoot with her horse, Jane. (photo by Steve Stuebner, courtesy Life on the Range)

approving another \$5 million for FY 2024."

What are your thoughts about our conservation education programs in Idaho?

"I believe conservation education and outreach in Idaho needs to be of an ongoing nature with programs and information available for students and adults. We all have experienced the tremendous growth Idaho has seen over the past two decades and not all our new citizens understand the particulars of our multifaceted Ag industry or its leading role in our state economy. This is an area we can perhaps provide additional outreach/education with events such as community farm and forestry tours like what Boundary SCD has provided (February 2023 SWCC Newsletter).

Concluding thoughts: "Nowadays, the Idaho Ag Industry has multiple issues to deal with that were not at the forefront 50 years ago when I was moving handlines on the ranch."

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Conservation of farmland seems to be more complicated for each generation of farmers when you're accounting for endangered species, water quality issues, and increasing governmental regulations. And then on top of that, the huge increases in diesel and fertilizer prices in the last couple of years has increased costs as well.

"I'm excited to be a member of the SWCC. I believe we have a great team of commissioners and staff working together to further conservation practices and contributing to Ag's successes across the state. I look forward to being a member of this team that continues to lead in *Conservation the Idaho Way*."

Wendy Pratt, Blackfoot

Wendy and her husband Mark operate a fifth-generation cattle ranch near Blackfoot. They have three kids and four grandchildren.

Wendy tells the story of conservation ranching at her blog: *The Pastoral Muse*. Wendy's 2019 TEDx talk on the benefits of well-managed grazing has garnered over 14,000 views on YouTube. She is a supervisor with the Central Bingham Soil and Water Conservation District.

She's been a commissioner since 2020.

What do you like about being a SWC Commissioner?

"I like being a commissioner because I get to learn about and be a part of state efforts to address the health of what truly sustains us all - soil and water."

Tell us about where you live ...

"We live in the rolling sandhills, east of Blackfoot near the Blackfoot River. We grow pasture and hay using mostly flood irrigation. Our cattle spend the summer in the Blackfoot River Mountains on productive and intact native range. I love where I live because it's a natural landscape with many diverse species of plants and



SWCC Chairman Erik Olson farms in the Kootenai River Valley with his Dad and uncle.

animals."

What are your thoughts about Ag Conservation in Idaho?

"I think we need to keep thinking about conservation in new ways. The challenges coming at us - from invasive species and climate change, to urban growth, increasing recreation and water scarcity - require inventive solutions and collaboration in ways we haven't seen before. Idaho citizens have done a lot of great work, but the need is accelerating in my view.

What are some of the biggest issues in the region you serve?

"My county is facing a possible water call on ground pumping. The impact of a low water table affects all of us, including surface water irrigators and the community at large. We also are in a nitrate priority area. Other concerns across our division include increasing recreation pressures and the need for reliable water sources. Any and all projects that promote wise water use, soil health, with an emphasis on education of producers and consumers will help with this need.

"I'm encouraged that flood irrigation is beginning to be appreciated for the benefit to wildlife and groundwater

replenishment.

What are your thoughts on conservation education?

We need more conservation education at all levels, in our schools, at agriculture events, and especially to newcomers to Idaho on our fragile natural resources and how each of us can help conserve what makes Idaho special.

Erik Olson, Chairman Bonner's Ferry

Erik Olson is North Idaho native and 4th generation farmer. Alongside his Dad and uncle, he farms 3,000 acres in the Kootenai Valley, near the Canadian border. He's been a SWC Commissioner since 2018.

Currently, Olson is the Chairman of the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission as well as a Supervisor for the Boundary Soil Conservation District. He's also Chairman of the Idaho Oilseed Commission, President of the Kootenai Valley Reclamation Association, Commissioner for Boundary Drainage District #6, and member of the Kootenai Valley Resource Initiative.

In 2018, Olson graduated from Leadership Idaho Agriculture with Class 38. This experience allowed him to take his knowledge of Agriculture to a new level. Erik has been involved with the local FFA chapter helping with tours and public speaking. Erik and his wife Cassie are very involved with the local schools and teaching where food comes from.

What do you like about being a SWC Commissioner?

"I like being out and about and listening and learning about farming and ranching in different areas of the state, seeing the diversity of Ag conservation projects going on, and learning about the needs everywhere statewide.

Tell us about where you live ...

"We live five miles south of the

Canadian border in the Kootenai River Valley. I've been all over the state and other parts of the country, and there's nothing like it anywhere else I've been. We really enjoy our little slice of heaven.

"Farming runs deep in our family, on both my mother's and father's side of the family. From dairy cows to wheat and canola, my knowledge of and love for agriculture isn't just a lifestyle but a passion."

What are your thoughts about Ag Conservation in Idaho?

"I've been encouraged to see the revitalization of the Water Quality Program for Agriculture (WQPA) by the Idaho Legislature the last two years. We've made some big strides with that funding. I'm very appreciative of what we've received from the Legislature. The Districts are showing they're capable of coming up with excellent conservation project proposals quickly, and we're showing the Legislature that this is a big deal to us, and we're eager to get those conservation dollars installed at the ground and farm level.

"I also want to say that there's been a big change in morale and demeanor among the SWC staff and IASCD in recent years. With Delwyne's leadership, he's brought a real breath of fresh air. He's done a really good job, and I've been really happy to see that. It is affecting our relationships with IASCD and the Districts, and we're able to get more work done on the ground because of it."

What do you see as some conservation priorities in the North Idaho region?

"We've been real capable of getting Section §319 water quality grants up here, but there are limited dollars for that program statewide and lots of competition for those dollars, so with the addition of the WQPA monies, that has changed the dynamic in a positive way. We're really encouraged to have those dollars available for ag

conservation.

"There's more we could do on the Kootenai River in terms of habitat improvements, strengthening the dikes and working on streambank erosion. In Boundary and Kootenai counties, there's a need for more funds to address streambank riparian issues and streambank erosion. The WQPA funding opens the door for funding to all sorts of projects.



Blake Hollingsworth, SWC Commissioner in Burley

Thoughts on Conservation Education

"My wife, Cassie, is the district administrator for Boundary SWCD. She gets out in the schools quite a bit. She's out with the Idaho Farm Bureau today to show the school kids Maggie the Cow.

"We've had a challenge up here in our county after a private landowner worked on a conservation project and created a wetland reserve that was donated to Idaho Fish and Game and 2,500 acres of farmland were taken out of production.

"So there's been a need to get out and education our farmers about the value of conservation projects but also that we want to keep working lands,

working."

Blake Hollingsworth, Burley SWC At-Large Commissioner

Blake Hollingsworth is a new commissioner. He has served since December 2022.

Hollingsworth is currently serving as a board member of the Mini-Cassia Chamber of Commerce, Vice President of the Kiwanis Club of Rupert, Coach of Burley Junior High Boys and Girls Basketball team, an IDFG Hunter Education instructor and an experienced collegiate/high school basketball referee.

He has a background in banking, financial management, communications and human resources. He's been involved with the South Central Community Action Partnership, Pocatello Zoological Society, Parks and Recreation Advisory Board Member, among other things.

What do you like about being a SWC Commissioner?

I've always been impressed with the Gem State and what it offers. It is my hope to get to know it better. As a commissioner, I have the opportunity to play a part in helping take care of what we have and try to make it better for future generations. Idaho is an incredible place to live, and we need to keep it that way.

Tell us about where you live ...

"I live in Burley, where we have a beautiful home (with five children aged 7-19). My family and I love Burley and what it has to offer. With the Snake River only a few minutes away from our home, my family and I will find ourselves enjoying the summer sunsets in our kayaks or hiking to our favorite fishing hole.

"With the City of Rocks close by, everything we enjoy doing is one hour or 1.5 hours away from home - from metal-detecting to golf. I like the small-town feel and being part

of such a great community. I love everything that Idaho has to offer, and I look forward to exploring it more.

What are your thoughts on Ag Conservation?

"Agriculture is the heart of what we do in our area. It's a critical aspect of who we are as a community and as a people. When I was in commercial banking, I had the opportunity to work with several farmers with a variety of Ag loans and lines. They helped me understand what it meant to be a farmer/dairyman and the value of Ag. Knowing that I was a small part in their operations inspires me in my approach to conservation.

"I want to help sustain our agricultural community, and conservation should be on the forefront of what we do in order to sustain a long Ag future."

What do you see as the big issues in your area?

Water. The conservation and preservation of water and the health of the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer are important issues. We're facing weather/environmental changes, and we need to continue to be prepared to deal with that. Part of that, I think, is how can we manage our limited water supplies for the future.

Thoughts on conservation education?

"I would like to learn more about what's going on with conservation education in Idaho. Looking at my experience on the Mini-Cassia Chamber, it's important to know your community and its resources before you can provide leadership on issues affecting it. Similarly, spending time to know Idaho - really know Idaho - then providing education around conservation practices, concerns, improvements would help bring awareness and foresight. Personally, I'd like to see more of it."

Karen Sharpnack, Shoshone

Karen has been a SWC Commissioner since August 2022.

In her day job, she's Executive Director



Karen Sharpnack, SWC Commissioner in Shoshone

of the Idaho Immunization Coalition.

What do you like about being a SWC Commissioner?

"I like making a difference in Conservation in a team setting with other Commissioners, SWC staff and partnerships like IASCD, DEQ, NRCS, and Idaho Legislators.

Tell us about where you live ...

"My family and I live in a 5-acre plot of Idaho naturally landscaped land that also includes an orchard, wind breaks, gardens and a green stripping. The energy we get from our home and land gives us a unique balance in life.

Tell us about your thoughts on Ag Conservation in Idaho

"We have the opportunity to do so much because of the additional funding that both the state and federal government are providing right now. This is the time for conservation advocates in Idaho to lead that effort and make a tremendous difference by working together for that success."

Are we doing enough? Are we on target?

"We are going in the right direction because of the partnerships that are being strengthened from all of the conservation projects being funded right now. Partnerships and working

together are key, but we need to keep the momentum going. If we look at the positive change we've made in the past two years, imagine what it will look like in five."

What do you see as some of the biggest needs/issues in the region you serve? "We need more flexibility with the funding that is available. Funding always has an accountability aspect to it, but having funding that is a bit more open to flexibility for projects would create more positive change, especially since each region in our state has different needs, and at times, we need to be more open to that change. Also, how can the state funding to the districts be increased so that some of the small districts can spend time actually raising dollars for conversation rather than the administrative staff."

Thoughts on Conservation Education

"I believe we could do more in terms of partnering with junior highs and high schools. We need to get the word out on the programs that are successful so that our youth know there are opportunities."

Are we doing enough?

"No. It does come down to the districts to take the responsibility to partner with schools and promote and encourage this growth. We need to understand the barriers that exist and see what we can do to encourage all districts to really get involved with all of their schools in each of the districts."

Joan Cloonan, Eagle

Joan Cloonan has lived in the Boise area for 41 years. She was appointed in August 2022 to serve on the SWC Board of Commissioners. She is retired after working in government affairs and regulatory management for the J.R. Simplot Company. She has been a supervisor on the Ada Soil and Water Conservation District Board for 10 years. She has a Ph.D. in chemistry

from Cornell and a law degree from Florida State University.

What do you like about being a SWC Commissioner?

I like being an advocate for conservation — not no use, but responsible use of resources - in an urban area where so many do not understand the importance of agriculture, water use and soil quality. It's good to be part of an organization that coordinates conservation efforts by NRCS, with funding from the EPA and DEQ, and nurtures conservation projects by soil and water conservation districts both individually and through their state organization, IASCD. The districts are the boots-on-the-ground conservation organizations, and we try to do all we can to help them to achieve success.

Tell us about where you live ...

I live in an apartment complex overlooking the Boise River in Eagle. I moved there from a house in Riverside Village, also near the Boise River, after my husband passed away. My apartment building is sandwiched between the river and a municipal park.

I am fortunate to be able to walk from my apartment to the Greenbelt and quickly be in a totally natural environment in the trees watching the river roar by and listening to the birds, often seeing great blue herons, osprey, geese and multiple varieties of ducks. Because my mobility is limited from time to time, my apartment is ideally located where I have unobstructed views trees and the river. I convinced my apartment management this year to plant a pollinator garden on one corner of the lot, and it's now thriving with a contingent of gardening residents following the growth and pollinator population.

What are your current thoughts about ag conservation in Idaho?

To me, it's always a process — I am a supervisor in an urban district. Our



Joan Cloonan, SWC Commissioner in Eagle

challenges are not always the same as the rural farming districts. We have education projects — 5th grade field days, outreach on conservation topics such as soil health and pollinators. We lease no till drills to farmers and find many are now buying their own equipment. We support programs that are looking to preserve agriculture in the region and work with neighboring districts where development has not progressed so far as in Ada County on agricultural preservation.

What do you see as some of the biggest needs/issues in the region you serve?

Conversion of good farmland to housing development is happening all around us. Water is big — availability and quality. Soil quality. Much comes down to water availability. Programs that we have been working on such as No-till agriculture and use of cover crops are helpful in enhancing soil quality and the ability of soils to conserve water.

Your thoughts on conservation education programs?

I don't know about all of Idaho. In Ada County, our district has filled a void in many ways and we continue

to find ways to coordinate with the school districts and become part of the curriculum. It's an ongoing effort that needs to continue.

Richard Savage, Hamer

Savage is third-generation Idaho cattle rancher in Clark County. He's a new commissioner, appointed in February.

He serves on the Upper Snake Water Quality Advisory Group, Clark SWCD, the state Wolf Depredation Control Board, and several sage grouse committees. He's past president of the Idaho Cattle Association.

Tell us about where you live.

"Well, I just finished the longest winter of my life. I have always loved the natural resources of Idaho. I live in Clark County, the least populated county in the state. So we have lots of open space and lots of resources. It's all a real blessing to us. Being in the cattle business, I love to live on the land. I look around at all of the beautiful things happening in nature all around us, and I'm always amazed how they all work together. Nature always seems to know best.

"But as a rancher, there's always a strong sense of responsibility to take care of the resource so our kids can make a living on the ranch. My grandfather took care of it, so we have to take care of it, too, so there are opportunities for our generations to come."

What do you like about being a SWC Commissioner?

"It sure was great to get more funding for the WQPA program (Water Quality Program for Agriculture) this year, and that allowed us to fund another 20 projects. From my perspective, there are more dollars available for conservation right now than we've had in a long time. We have the partnerships in place and the effort to get things done on the ground. People are trying to make things better all the time.

"One of the keys is we have a lot of

experience on the SWC Board, and that helps us know what projects are most important for each region of the state.”

What do you see as some of the biggest conservation needs in your region?

“I’m always amazed at how much we’re doing on the conservation front, but when I’m driving around, I can always see more stuff that needs to be done. We live in a real arid county, so water is crucial for everything. We could use more water pipelines to make better use of the resource.

“I wince a little when I drive by a set of corrals where the wastewater is still running into a stream. We know how to deal with things like that to keep the waste out of the stream. So we need to do more work to make sure we’re being good neighbors with our natural resources. We’ve got more to do.

“But we’ve got some successes, too. In Teton County, we’ve worked with the Friends of the Teton River and landowners to implement a conservation project on Fox Creek, putting that stream back into its historical course. That one turned out really nice.

“I’m seeing how rentals of the no-till drill are helping reduce wind and water erosion in our region. We’ve got areas on I-15 where they have to put up flashing lights on windy days when we have wind blowing topsoil across the freeway to the point where there’s almost no visibility. When you have no-till drills in place and cover crops being planted, the soil is covered and



SWC Commissioner Richard Savage, left, checks out a farm field with robust cover crops growing to enhance Soil Health. (courtesy Robbie Taylor)

it reduces wind erosion by quite a bit.

“I also have been glad to see a number of conservation projects installed in the Upper Snake and the tributaries – the St. Mary’s pipeline project and aquifer-recharge projects for the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer area are a couple that come to mind. Obviously water is the No. 1 resource, and it’s becoming more valuable all the time. We’ve all got to be good stewards of the resource. We can’t emphasize that enough.”

Thoughts on conservation education?

“We’ve got to remind the younger generations that when you’re using a natural resource, you’ve got to pay it back. That’s important for kids in the younger grades up to the college level.

“We’re fortunate to have a really good administrator for our district, Robbie Taylor, district manager for Fremont and Clark Soil and Water Conservation Districts. I can’t say enough good about him. He’s got a great heart for conservation. He’s very active in getting our education programs out to the schools. He’s active with the Envirothon and stuff like that.”

Concluding thoughts

“I’m always humbled by nature. Last winter, we were all reminded about who’s in charge. I’ve been grateful to spend all of my life out here on our ranch, and I’m hopeful to give my public service to the Conservation Commission.”

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

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