

Power of Three



EXTENSIVE PARTNERSHIPS IN IDAHO LEAD TO CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORIES STATEWIDE

By Steve Stuebner

Partnerships are at the heart of conservation success stories across Idaho, leading to scores of voluntary, non-regulatory ag conservation projects statewide.

The Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission has engaged in partnerships with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the state's 50 soil and water conservation districts for decades. They refer to that

partnership as the "Power of Three."

After Gov. Brad Little and the Idaho Legislature revitalized the Water Quality Program for Agriculture (WQPA) in the last two years in a row – allowing the Conservation Commission to award a total of \$10 million in ag conservation projects statewide – the partnership has been working well, officials said.

Each spring in the last two years, Conservation Commission staff have reached out to assist the state's soil

and water conservation districts in putting together WQPA applications in a timely manner. And the SWC Board of Commissioners has worked quickly to award grants so the projects can get implemented in the field as quickly as possible.

In fiscal 2022, the SWC Commission approved 48 projects involving conservation 33 districts that will deliver \$18.5 million in conservation benefits for an expenditure of \$5M in the WQPA program. In fiscal 2023,



Natural Resources Conservation Service

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



Hammett landowners partnered with the Elmore District, NRCS, King Hill Irrigation District, SWC and the Idaho Water Resource Board to convert aging open canals to a more efficient enclosed pipeline irrigation system.

the SWC Commission approved 51 projects with 41 conservation districts to provide \$17.8 million in conservation benefits with \$4.97 million in funding.

On some projects, NRCS staff already had been working with Idaho landowners to develop conservation projects through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which receives funding from the national

Farm Bill. By combining an EQIP project with a WQPA grant, it can give landowners enough funds to move forward with a project that might not advance without that cost-share partnership funding.

"We learned that in the first round

of WQPA funding, the grants helped projects pencil to cover the extra inflationary costs of things like pipe for pipelines and other items," said Delwyne Trefz, Administrator of the Conservation Commission. "That's pretty cool."

The revitalization of the WQPA program has "made our partnerships with the districts and NRCS stronger," added Loretta Strickland, SWC deputy

administrator. "Working with Districts to implement WQPA facilitated a lot of conversations and helped to improve and invigorate our relationships with Districts at every level."

Curtis Elke, NRCS State Conservationist, and the NRCS

staff have been a key player in the Power of Three partnership with the Conservation Commission and the state's soil and water conservation districts through the Idaho Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (IASCD) for many years.

Soon after Elke took the reins of NRCS in Idaho, he worked on expanding

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partnerships and relationships with state and federal agencies. He noticed early on that there was an unusual level of cooperation between state and federal agency officials on natural resources challenges and conservation issues. Elke's outreach has been timely and beneficial because in the last two years, there has been an influx of federal funding for a wide variety of water quality and conservation projects through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and infrastructure bills passed by Congress.

Federal funding has substantially increased dollars available for conservation projects administered by the Bureau of Reclamation, the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Environmental Protection Agency, the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, the Idaho Water Resource Board and other agencies.

Elke was pleased to notice that the agency directors understood the value of leveraging each one's available resources to get more done at the ground level.

"We talked about what we could do to break down the policy, regulatory and other known barriers between the agencies and have more of an "All Hands, All Lands" approach to land management," he says. "How can we erase the lines and treat the landscape as one whole?"

"That's a heck of a good idea," said Tim Murphy, who recently retired as the Idaho State Director of the Bureau of Land Management. Now Murphy serves as an Idaho Fish and Game Commissioner, representing Southwest Idaho.

Over the last few years, Elke and his team have been nurturing the growth of NRCS's partnerships with fellow state and federal agencies and non-profit conservation groups to a list that exceeds 100 different groups, he said.

"I feel so grateful for the relationships

we have in Idaho," he says. "We have remarkable partnerships that are also considered friendships. Everyone is very humble. Everybody wants to work together. It makes my life so much easier, and my team's life much easier."

"Also, successful partnerships take work. Because each of us are dedicated to the position we serve and value each other as we do, we are also willing to invest in each other as we have."

Partnership projects in natural resources management include:

- Working with the Idaho Transportation Department to reduce blowing dust and top soil next to Interstate freeways in Southeast Idaho and Eastern Idaho.
- Water efficiency, aquifer recharge and water conservation projects across the Snake River Plain in partnership with the Idaho Water Resource Board, irrigation districts, canal companies and more.
- The new Cheatgrass Challenge with county noxious weed coordinators, soil and water conservation districts, 50 private landowners, the BLM, Idaho Fish and Game, Idaho Governor's Office on Species Conservation, IDL, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and nonprofits working together on six initial projects in 2020.



Curtis Elke, NRCS State Conservationist in Idaho, is a big champion for broadening partnerships and stretching dollars for conservation projects. (NRCS photo)

- Post-fire rehabilitation projects like the coordinated response to the Soda Fire complex in the Owyhee Canyonlands and the coordinated response on private, state and federal lands in the aftermath of the Sharps Fire in the Pioneer Mountains.
- Soil Health initiatives to encourage no-till direct-seed farming, planting cover crops between cash crops, and grazing cover crops with livestock to enrich the soil.
- Nutrient management projects in the Magic Valley to help landowners with dairy manure management in land application processes.
- Shared Stewardship projects focusing on forest management and improving forest health in Idaho.
- And more.

Conservation District partnerships

A number of Idaho's conservation districts and IASCD, as the statewide organization, work with a growing number of partners to support conservation projects throughout the state.

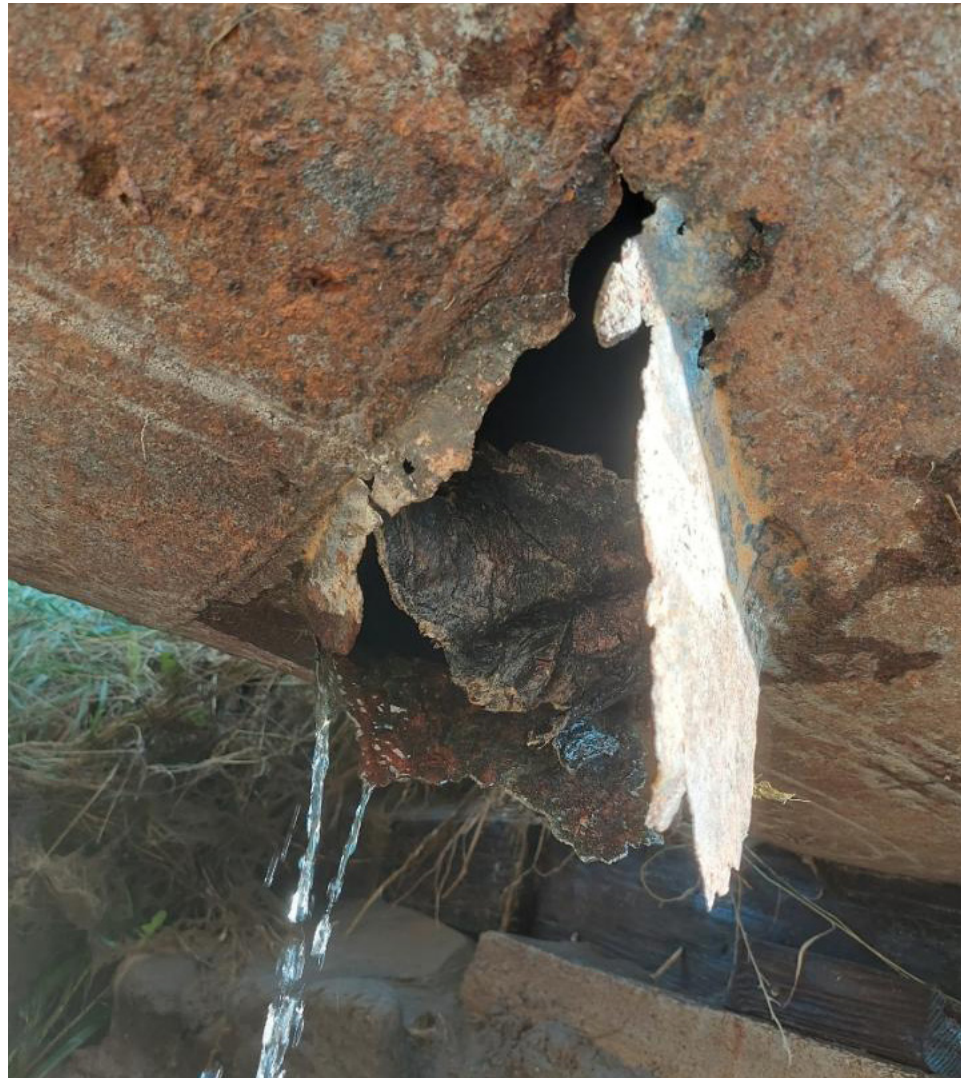
One of those partnerships is with the Idaho State Department of Agriculture (ISDA), which oversees the state's Invasive Species Program. The Kootenai-Shoshone, Oneida and Bruneau districts manage watercraft inspection stations for ISDA and help prevent Idaho's pristine waters from getting infected with invasive zebra and quagga mussels.

"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, which manages the Malad Invasive Species watercraft inspection station on Interstate 15 near the Utah border. "We get a lot of the snowbirds coming back north after spending a winter down south."

Boats often come to Idaho from Lake Powell, and inspectors often find the boats fouled with invasive mussels. In 2022, the Oneida District discovered invasive mussels in 16 out of 36 contaminated boats statewide, according to ISDA. Most of the fouled boats at the Malad station came from either Lake Powell, Utah, or Lake Havasu, Ariz.

Since 2009, more than 1 million inspections have occurred at the Idaho's watercraft inspection stations statewide, intercepting invasive mussels in 413 fouled boats as of late August 2023, according to ISDA. 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.

"Malad is one of our crucial corridors for watercraft inspection," says Nic



WQPA grants can be combined with Idaho Water Resource Board Aging Infrastructure Grants to upgrade crumbling irrigation infrastructure. (file photo)

Zurfluh, Section Manager of Invasive Species Coordination and Outreach for ISDA. "The Oneida District has been outstanding partner to work with. It operates the station efficiently because they are tied in closely with the local community."

Lemhi and Custer District partnerships

The Lemhi and Custer soil and water districts work closely with landowners and the Idaho Office of Species Conservation in Salmon to plan projects with ag conservation benefits that also have major benefits for imperiled Chinook salmon and steelhead. The overall umbrella for that project is the Upper Salmon Basin Watershed Project, managed by OSC.

When it started in the early 1990s,

it was called "Model Watershed," launched by the Lemhi District. Local ranchers have been working closely with fish experts and conservation professionals to improve fish habitat for salmon and steelhead, migrating fish that travel more than 800 miles from here to the Pacific Ocean, while also making improvements to Lemhi and Custer county ranch operations and installing best management practices on ag lands.

Major milestones by the Upper Salmon Basin Watershed Project include:

- 130 conservation projects and counting.
- Minimum stream flows for fish passage at L-6, the main Lemhi River



Field tours in the Upper Salmon Basin reveal the depth of partnerships they have working together on projects.

irrigation diversion

- Preserving working lands and open space forever – nearly 30,000 acres of prime spawning areas protected via conservation easements.
- Over 50 miles of riparian fencing
- Restoring water flows to 12 tributary streams, opening up 50+ miles of spawning habitat for Chinook salmon and 40+ miles of spawning habitat for steelhead.
- Installing 110+ fish screens at irrigation diversions to keep juvenile fish in the river.
- Brokering 50+ water transactions that restored water to tributary streams and the main Lemhi River.
- Dozens of water efficiency projects to save precious water for fish, increase crop yields and reduce labor.
- Replacing 75+ old irrigation diversions with fish-friendly weirs.
- All this, while ensuring that working ranches remain working for the local tax base and economy.

Major funding from the Bonneville Power Administration, Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund, NRCS,

conservation organizations, BOR, IDFG and many others has been instrumental for the conservation investments. At least an estimated \$75 million has been invested in conservation projects basin-wide.

Focus on the customer – Idaho landowners

A consistent thread throughout all of the partnership conservation projects is to focus on the needs of Idaho farmers and ranchers when planning and implementing projects, Trefz says.

“The local conservation districts, and the Board of Supervisors that sits on that District Board, are key to this whole conservation planning process because of the wealth of local knowledge that they bring to the process,” he says.

It’s essential to make sure ag conservation projects work for the landowners and enhance their farming and ranching operations, officials say. That’s been a key guiding principle of the Lemhi Basin conservation work since Day 1. Work to improve fish habitat must also enhance the ranch.

“That’s how we approach all of our projects. It needs to benefit both,” notes Jeff Diluccia, a fish biologist for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game in Salmon. “Using that approach is multiple, sustainable use, whereas ag is key to this valley, so we have to protect those interests.”

David Ascuena, an Elmore County farmer, agrees. “We’re active environmentalists. We want to protect our environment. Because that’s our livelihood and that’s our home. That is our way of life.”

Trefz agrees. “A lot of these guys are very in tune with the reality that they’ve got to conserve these natural resources for their business and lifestyle to be sustainable. We applaud their willingness to step up to be engaged in conservation projects because it does take an extra effort, and often times, it requires a local cost-share investment that comes directly out of their pocket.”

Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis. Portions of this story were published previously by NRCS and the “Life on the Range” story/video series.

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