



Pronghorn antelope on the move during their migration to lower elevations in the late fall. (Courtesy National Park Service)

BUTTE DISTRICT WORKS ON MAJOR PARTNERSHIP PROJECT TO INSTALL WILDLIFE-FRIENDLY FENCING

By Steve Stuebner

The Butte Soil and Water Conservation District has been working with local landowners, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and many other partners to install wildlife-friendly fencing along U.S. 26 to benefit a major antelope migration corridor, big game, sage grouse and livestock.

Since 2001, landowners and partners have installed more than 100 miles of wildlife-friendly fence while removing more than 60 miles of old, standard barbed-wire livestock fencing.

Additional partners include the

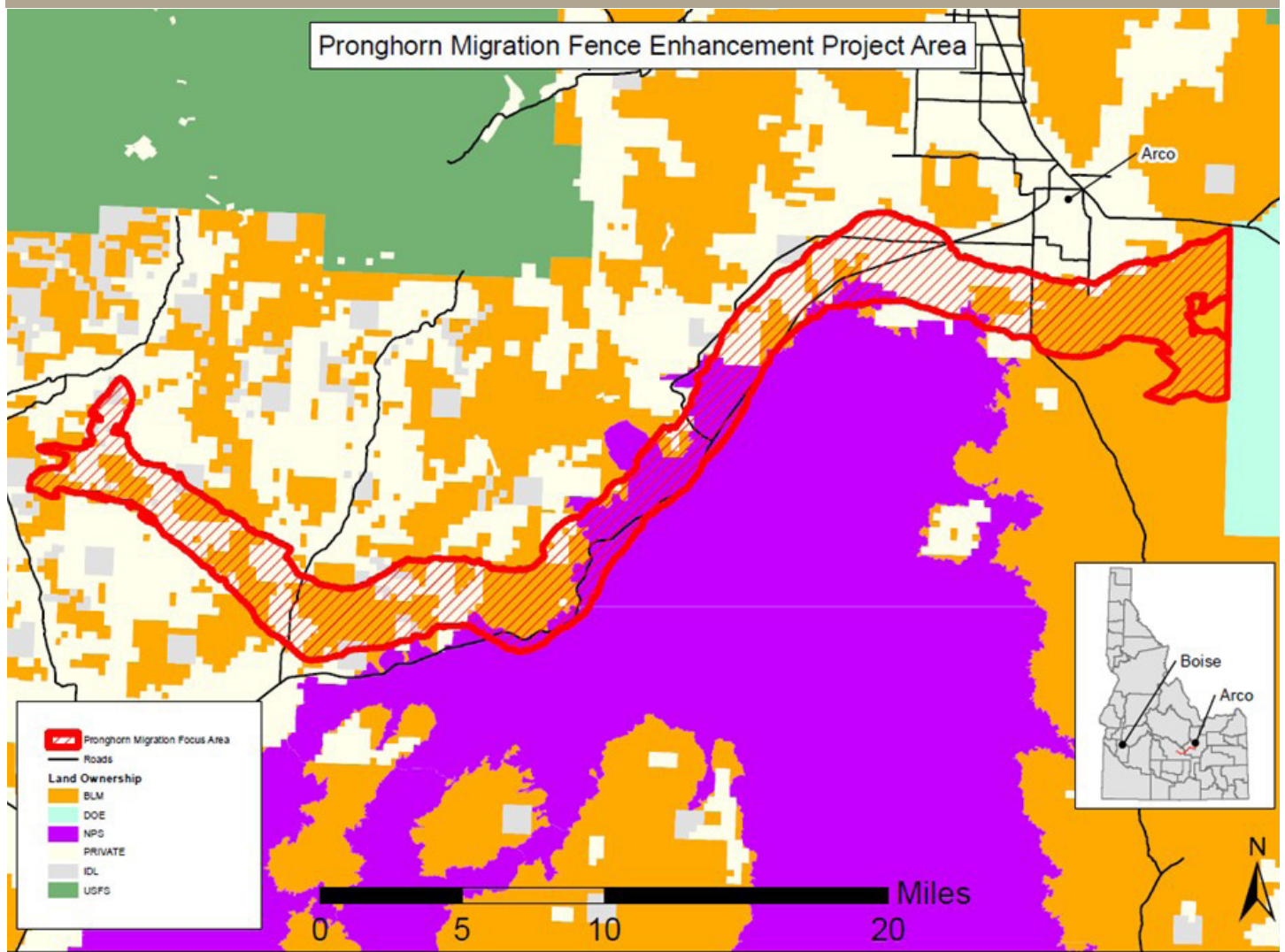
National Park Service at Craters of the Moon National Monument, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Bureau of Land Management, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“The Butte District and NRCS staff in Arco have been really instrumental in making the project go,” said Randy Purser, Chairman of the Butte District. “It’s been a huge success because the landowners have really stepped up to participate. We’re doing as much as we can every year, with the money we have, and we’ve got a waiting list of more landowners who want to participate in the future.”

In 2025, NRCS obligated \$709,125 for the wildlife friendly fencing program covering 10 contracts with landowners through its Big Game Initiative. Partner agencies also contributed \$150,000 to the project in the current year.

The new fencing is being built on the north side of U.S. 26 from the Craters of the Moon National Monument area to Arco, and on the south side of the highway from Arco to the antelope winter range area, south of Howe.

Carson Kelly, a rancher from the Darlington area in the Big Lost River Valley, was an early adopter in the fencing project, getting involved in



Map shows the pronghorn antelope migration focus area in red-hashed zone, and portions of where the fencing has been built, from the foothills of the Pioneer Mountains to points east of Arco. Purple color indicates the Craters of the Moon National Monument boundary (Courtesy NRCS).

2021. The opportunity to build new fencing along the south side of U.S. 26, east of Arco, provided a more solid control point for managing his cattle on federal grazing allotments in that area.

Previously, the fencing along the south side of the highway was in poor condition or did not exist, Kelly said.

“I think I’ve put in more wildlife-friendly fencing than any other landowner in Butte County,” he said. “The new fencing keeps my cattle on the south side of the highway, so I don’t get calls anymore about my cattle being on the highway in the middle of the night. Or, I’d get calls about 50 cows out grazing on the

lawn at the highway Rest Area.”

The new fencing allows his cattle to utilize the rangelands much better than they did before, he said. “It spreads out the cows much better,” he said. “Now my cows are well-distributed in the allotment, and they’re only using about 40 percent of the grass. It’s better for my cows long-term, and it’s better for the range long-term. It’s definitely been an improvement.”

Several key initiatives led to a strong buy-in from the Butte District, NRCS and landowners in the fencing project.

1. A ground-breaking research project in 2009, funded by the

Lava Lake Institute for Science and Conservation and the Wildlife Conservation Society, confirmed that

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antelope migrated from the Pioneer Mountains, out south to the north edge of the Craters of the Moon National Monument lava fields, then onto the vast, 89-square-mile Idaho National Laboratory property in the Arco desert, east of Howe.

Round trip, the migration route is approximately 160 miles long. The migration “ranks among the farthest for any land mammal in the Western Hemisphere,” researchers said

in a news release published on *National Geographic* online at the time.

2. That led The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to work on putting together an extensive series of conservation easements with private landowners and ranchers in the Pioneer Mountains. The conservation easements would ensure that antelope could migrate from National Forest lands to the north, through private lands to the south, to the Craters property, INL and other lands in the Arco desert safely during the winter.

At last count, TNC has worked with private landowners to the protect more than 100,000 acres of private ranchland rich with water and wildlife values particularly for sage grouse and antelope over the last 20 years. The lands remain as working

ranches, but there are provisions in the contracts that protect wildlife habitat and migration corridors. In essence, TNC and the Pioneers Alliance pieced together a giant jigsaw puzzle of private, state and federal lands into a cohesive, functioning whole for wildlife and livestock.

3. In 2021, the NRCS launched a new Big Game Initiative program through the Farm Bill that provided funding to benefit wildlife migration corridors and other wildlife habitat projects nationwide. The local NRCS staff in Arco applied for funding to assist with installing wildlife-friendly fencing on the north side of U.S. 26, and removing old, antiquated fencing.

NRCS worked with a collaborative team of the Butte District, agency officials and landowners in Local

Working Groups to develop fencing projects, beginning in 2022. They are continuing to work together on new fencing areas each year.

The NPS, NRCS, BLM, IDFG, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are all contributing funds to the project. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation has contributed more than \$100,000 to the project as well.

“We are putting real dollars into making things safer for migrating big game animals,” said Jesse Fullmer, NRCS Team Lead in Arco. “This project dovetails real well with the previous conservation work that’s been done in the Pioneers. We’re trying to keep the animals moving fluidly through the different land ownerships when it comes time for them to migrate to winter range or vice-versa.”

Previously, NRCS had tried to work



Map shows the antelope migration route to winter range, east of Howe, at a bigger-picture level. (Courtesy Program Antelope research report by Todd Stefanic and Derek Schleicher).

with landowners to improve wildlife habitat and water developments in the migration corridor to keep them away from cash crops, but that didn't work very well, Fullmer said. "The landowners didn't want the wildlife to become habituated to coming down and foraging on private lands to facilitate their migration. The fencing approach is working much better."

How many antelope are involved?

The antelope herds that benefit from the fencing project descend to lower elevations in the late fall from the Pioneer Mountains, Big Lost, Little Lost, Birch Creek and Medicine Lodge Creek areas, according to IDFG officials.

"We call it a big mixing pot," said Brett Gullet, IDFG Habitat Biologist.

In terms of sheer numbers, more than 2,500 antelope migrate to INL areas east of Howe for the winter. Elk and mule deer also benefit from the fencing project as they also migrate out of the mountains to winter range in the Arco desert .

Details on the fencing: The specifications on the wildlife-friendly fencing allow for antelope to pass underneath the fences, as they like to do. The bottom strand of the fencing is smooth, and it's 18 inches above the ground. The next strand is 24 inches above ground, then 30 inches, and the top wire is 42 inches above the ground. The space between the top wire and the 2nd strand is wide enough that the hoofs or legs of elk and deer do not get stuck between the top wires of the fencing.

"The elk have no trouble going over a 42-inch-high fence," Kelly said. "The antelope seem to flow through just fine as well. When they're on the move in the spring, I see them out there every day, moving single



Wildlife-friendly fencing includes special reflective markers on the top strand that alert sage grouse and big game animals that they're approaching a fence in the daytime and at night. (Photo courtesy of IDFG).

file through the countryside."

The new fence dimensions also work well to contain his cattle, Kelly said.

Landowners receive funding for installing the fencing projects; they can do the work themselves or contract it out. "I've done about one-third of it myself, and when it gets too hard and nasty in the rocks, I'll hire someone else to install it," Kelly said.

Idaho Fish and Game has set up volunteer opportunities for people from Idaho Falls, Arco and elsewhere to work on removing old, antiquated fencing, officials said. IDFG has a skid steer with a large spool to roll up the old barbed wire and dispose of it in a safe place.

A spokesman for the Bureau of Land Management in Idaho Falls said the agency is pleased to be participating in the project. "It's a really good project," the spokesman said. "Because of the collaborative nature of this project, we can do more work across different property lines. Partnering with the landowners, we can take a landscape approach."

Another way to put it is "All Hands, All Land" – a moot often used in other

partnership projects in Idaho that cross multiple land-ownership boundaries.

Craters of the Moon officials have hired Utah Conservation Corps crews to help with installing wildlife fencing in the challenging lava rock areas. "They have been an awesome partner," Fullmer said.

Landowner buy-in has been strong because of the Butte District's involvement, TNC's previous work with landowners on the Pioneer Mountains conservation easements, NRCS Local Working Group collaborative meetings, and the benefits that landowners get by installing new fencing that also keeps their cattle in the right place.

"I think a lot of it is the positive PR that we're getting from the project. It's important to note that the fencing is beneficial for the landowners too," Purser said. "It's a win-win project for everybody."

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

SWCC'S EILEEN ROWAN WINS GOVERNOR'S AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN AGRICULTURE - ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP CATEGORY

By Steve Stuebner

SWCC's Eileen Rowan received a Governor's Award for Excellence in Agriculture in the Environmental Stewardship category at the Idaho Ag Summit awards banquet in Boise on Feb. 17.

"Eileen Rowan's exceptional contributions to environmental conservation and sustainability describe her unwavering dedication to assuring the sustainability of agricultural practices in North Central Idaho," the Ag Summit program said.

She's worked for the Commission since August 1997.

"Eileen has played a pivotal role in implementing Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) projects across Lewis, Idaho and Clearwater counties. She has written and assisted with obtaining over 76 grants for district projects totalling over \$12.3 million in funding," the program said.

"Eileen's work as a soil scientist from



Gov. Brad Little presents the prestigious award to Rowan at the Idaho Ag Summit.

1997-2001 has been instrumental in advancing our understanding of soil properties and their impact on the environment. Her meticulous mapping, profile descriptions, and data analysis have provided invaluable insights into soil composition and characteristics.

Eileen is a dedicated educator, both within the job and in her off-duty life. She seeks opportunities to educate others, from elementary-aged children through high schoolers to adults, about the environment including soil and water restoration, agricultural best practices, fuels reduction and fire safety, and other aspects of resource management.

"Honestly, it was very humbling to receive the award. I very much appreciate the kind words that were expressed in the letters of recommendations from my conservation districts," Rowan said. "It's an exceptional feeling to be able to help landowners do work on their property that helps them have a better operation. The side benefit is that the projects improve our surface and groundwater. This benefits all our communities and citizens. To make a difference through the conservation work is a driving force to the passion behind our work."

JENNIE OLENSLAGER JOINS SWCC IN SODA SPRINGS

Jennie Olenlager, who has a strong background in agriculture, has joined the SWCC staff as a Natural Resources Conservationist, based in Soda Springs.

Olenlager joined SWCC in March 2025. She works with the Bear Lake, Caribou, Franklin, Oneida, and Portneuf Districts in Eastern Idaho.

"I was raised on a 5-generation dairy in Star Valley, Wyo.," she said. "We raised our own barley and alfalfa, replacement heifers and sold milk to, the then-famous Star Valley Cheese Factory. In the early

2000s the cheese factory closed, and we switched the entire operation to raising grass hay, grass hay mix, beef cattle and became a hay producer. My six kids and I also raised horses, sheep, and goats."

"Recently, I moved my family to Chesterfield, where we are rebuilding our operation."

"The opportunity to work for SWCC enables me to support producers and landowners with conservation projects that can bring added value to their

operations. It also fulfills my love for agriculture and my hope for agriculture's future.

"My favorite thing about working for the SWCC is the people that I get to work with. I appreciate all of the proactive efforts of the Districts and landowners in my region."

To get in touch with Olenlager, she can be reached at jennie.olenslager@swc.idaho.gov or 208-749-0671

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322 East Front Street, Suite 560 Boise Idaho

83702 P: 208-332-1790 • ww332-1799

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