



The Jefferson Irrigation Company near Terreton converted an open irrigation ditch to an enclosed pipeline for a distance of 10 miles with a \$581,488 Aging Infrastructure Grant from the Idaho Water Resource Board, \$1.2 million from NRCS EQIP and local water users covered \$682,617. Total project cost was \$2.5M (Photo courtesy Jefferson Irrigation Co.)

DISTRICTS ENCOURAGED TO TAP INTO ALTERNATIVE FUNDING SOURCES FOR CONSERVATION PROJECTS

By Steve Stuebner

Finding a “pot of gold” to fund conservation projects can be elusive for Idaho’s Soil and Water Conservation Districts and partner entities working to fund much-needed projects on private lands in Idaho.

With state budgets running tighter than usual lately, the Idaho Legislature did not provide any funding for the Water Quality Program for Agriculture (WQPA) in fiscal 2027, for example, ending a

string of years when there was at least \$1 million available for district projects in fiscal 2025 and 2026, and \$5 million in fiscal 2023 and 2024.

With no WQPA funds available for now, and shrinking budgets for state grant funds from the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), our staff at the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission thought it might be helpful to review other funding programs available for voluntary, non-regulatory conservation projects on private farmlands and

ranch properties in Idaho.

“It’s never too early to start planning projects,” says Meghan Brooksher, a Water Quality Specialist for the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission. “Everyone is trying to find funding for projects somewhere, but it can be challenging. Our staff is available as a resource for districts to help them match their project with potential funding sources. Be sure to reach out to ensure you’re not overlooking anything.”



A low-interest loan from the Conservation Commission's RCRDP program was used to purchase a new irrigation system for a Canyon County landowner, who doubled the stocking capacity of a grazing pasture. (Photo by Steve Stuebner)

In a recent survey published by the Western Landowners Alliance, titled "The Scale of Landowner Investments in Conservation," landowners showed strong interest in installing conservation projects on private lands, but 65% of the landowners said the high cost of projects was the single-largest barrier they face.

Nevertheless, the survey, based on 2024 data, showed that western landowners had invested more than \$400 million in conservation projects on private lands, including \$124.1 million on rangeland improvements and \$69 million on forestry projects, \$93 million on water projects and \$62.2 million on wildlife projects.

Looking at FY 2024 Farm Bill EQIP obligated funds per state, Idaho led all western states except California with \$48 million in conservation projects, coordinated by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), districts, the commission staff, and other project partners. That shows strong buy-in by Idaho producers statewide.

The Idaho Association of Conservation Districts (IASCD)

FY 2024 accomplishments report indicated that 149,036 people in the state were impacted by conservation district projects and outreach that year, touching 1,560 ranchers and farmers, 16,500 students and 24,000 members of the general public. In FY '24, the IASCD report indicated that 132 conservation projects were installed on farms and ranches in Idaho through district outreach, and the districts inspected 107,000 watercraft at district-managed Invasive Species Watercraft check stations statewide, among other projects.

Why are conservation projects needed? Many proposed grant projects are scored well and funded if they improve water quality in degraded streams, reduce soil erosion and sediment flows into rivers and lakes, save water by converting to more efficient irrigation projects, improve livestock BMPs, improve water quality and sediment runoff on forest streams, reduce fire danger and increase resiliency with forest health projects, and more.

SWCC staff recently gave a

presentation to a grower workshop sponsored by the Cassia and Minidoka Districts about the wide array of funding options available, including several grant funds administered by the Idaho Water Resource Board.

Here is a rundown of more than 10 funding sources that districts are eligible to apply for, and how those funds have been used by districts in recent years:

• **Commission low-interest loans for conservation projects** under the Resource Conservation & Rangeland

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New pump station on the Snake River for West Indian Cove Water Co. was funded by NRCS, an Aging Infrastructure Grant from the IWRB, and a WQPA grant. Total project cost was \$1.6 million. (Photo courtesy Dale Hooley)

Development Program (RCRDP). Eligible projects address soil and water issues, like improving riparian areas or enhancing fish and wildlife habitat, plus purchases of irrigation equipment, no-till drills, livestock fencing and streambank protection.

The maximum loan allowed under the program is \$600,000. Interest rates vary from 3-6%.

In July 2025, the SWCC newsletter highlighted the value of the RCRDP loan program. Wayne Hungatte, a producer in Canyon County, installed a more efficient irrigation system on an 85-acre alfalfa field, doubling the capacity of the field for Hungatte's cattle herd. He also implemented a more intensive grazing system with solar hotwire fencing.

In that same issue, the Turner family purchased a Great Plains no-till drill with the assistance of the low-interest loan program. With the drill, they extended the length of

their growing season by 10-12 days and increased crop yield by 15-25 percent.

For the loan program, applications should be submitted at least two months before the conservation project is needed and planned for implementation. Projects must be installed within one year from the loan approval date.

For more information, send inquiries to loans@swc.idaho.gov or call the SWCC main office, 208-332-1790.

•Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) State Ag Best Management Practices (BMP) grants. Eligible projects should target agricultural practices that improve water quality and meet the objectives of total maximum daily load requirements (TMDL) for local streams and water bodies. Applicants must target projects that are ready to

implement.

The DEQ Ag BMP grants cover up to 60% of the costs of a conservation project. The application period is open from Mid-March to April 15.

The Canyon SCD has tapped into the DEQ Ag BMP funds for converting fields from flood irrigation to pivot irrigation, converting to drip irrigation, and for Boise River streambank stabilization projects.

•Federal 319 grants from the Environmental Protection Agency/DEQ. A successful 319 grant should focus on reducing pollutants and improving the water quality of lakes, streams, rivers, and aquifers, according to DEQ. Projects must target pollutants identified in TMDLs and implementation plans.

The 319 grant program is a very competitive statewide program. The grants can cover up to 60 percent of a project cost up to \$250,000. The application period is open from April 15-July 15. An average of about 10 projects are funded each year with an annual budget of about \$1.54 million.

A number of 319 grant projects have been profiled in the SWCC newsletter over the years. It's challenging to secure a 319 grant because the program is open to a wide variety of entities, including Native American tribes, and the competition for funding is stiff.

Tip from staff: In applications, DEQ wants to know: Where is the proposal area in relationship to a 303 (d) listed waterbody, the identified water quality concern, Nitrate Priority Area (NPA), or other points of concern and does the project have a strong likelihood of improving water quality?

Another tip: If your conservation district is located near a Nitrate Priority Area in the state, it may

improve your chance of success in landing a grant. Nitrate is one of the most widespread groundwater contaminants in Idaho. This Nitrate priority ranking was created by DEQ using sampling results conducted by IDWR, U.S. Geological Survey, Idaho State Department of Agriculture, and DEQ.

•**The Idaho Water Resource Board (IWRB) has many grant programs available to districts** including: flood management grants, aging infrastructure grants, surface water measuring and monitoring grants, groundwater to surface water conversion grants, and surface water efficiency grants.

A number of Idaho's conservation districts have been successful in securing flood management grants, including the Clearwater SWCD. The application period for flood grants ended in June. Flood grants can provide a 50% cost-share for projects up to \$200,000 in size. About \$1 million statewide is available for projects annually. Grant awards for 2026 will be announced by the IWRB in early August at its Rexburg board meeting.

See the IWRB Financial Programs web page for more information about applying for IWRB grants. <https://idwr.idaho.gov/iwrb-overview/iwrb-financial-programs-grants/>

The deadline for Aging Infrastructure Grants is Aug. 7th, 2026. Those grants can provide 50% cost-share funding for projects up to \$2 million. Funds for those grants may run out by 2027.

Monitoring and measurement grants can provide a 50% cost share for projects up to \$250,000. These grants are often used to automate water diversions with real-time measurement and telemetry



Fuels-mitigation project near Winchester, led by the Lewis Conservation District with an Idaho Department of Lands Western Fire Manager grant. (Courtesy Eileen Rowan/SWCC)

equipment to save time and money for irrigation districts and canal companies. Applications are open year-round, starting each year on July 1.

The IWRB Surface Water Efficiencies grant program is limited to surface water users in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer region of Southern and Eastern Idaho. Up to 100 percent of the project costs can be covered by the IWRB. Applications are open year-round.

•**Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) Western Fire Managers Grant**

Project and Project area must be in the County Fire Protection Plan (or Multi-Hazard Plan) and align with the Forest Action Plan.

The Lewis and Clearwater Districts have made extensive use of this program.

<https://www.idl.idaho.gov/about-forestry/forestry-fire-grants/western-state-fire-managers/>

•**IDL Hazardous Fuels Grant**

The project MUST be near an active Forest Service project.

The Idaho SWCD was able to use these

funds in 2015 near Elk City.

<https://www.idl.idaho.gov/about-forestry/forestry-fire-grants/hazard-fuels-reduction-grants/>

•**IDL Landscape Restoration Grants**

<https://www.idl.idaho.gov/about-forestry/forestry-fire-grants/landscape-scale-restoration-grants-and-contacts/>

The Idaho SWCD used these funds to help replant timber lost after the Clearwater Complex fire in 2015 for private landowners. Funds used in 2016/2017.

Note from SWCC staff: On all IDL grants, are they are reimbursable – meaning the district has to pay the contractor (and prove that with a canceled check) then be reimbursed. No funds go directly to a landowner; districts pay the contractors directly. This means the district has to do a bid process to select contractors.

<https://www.idl.idaho.gov/about-forestry/forestry-fire-grants/landscape-scale-restoration-grants-and-contacts/>

•**Stay in touch with your county**



Drip irrigation system being installed in a farm field in Canyon County. Canyon SCD has tapped into 319 grants, DEQ Ag BMP grants, and more to improve water quality in the Lower Boise River watershed. (Courtesy Stan Hays)

commissioners! Some conservation districts in the state receive general funds from their local county commissioners each year. The Portneuf, Gem, Adams, Weiser River, Payette, Valley, Squaw Creek, Blaine, Custer, Lemhi, Kootenai-Shoshone, Latah, Twin Falls, districts all receive varying amounts of funding from their counties. In fiscal 2026, Ada County contributed \$70,000 to the Ada District to support projects.

•**NRCS grant programs.** Many districts are familiar with NRCS EQIP programs. The NRCS PL-566 Small Watershed Program assists local districts in conducting watershed surveys and investigations, and in planning and installing structural and land treatment measures for watershed protection and flood prevention. The NRCS RCPP program is a partner-driven approach to conservation that funds solutions to natural resource challenges on agricultural land. Contact your

county NRCS District Conservationist for more information on these programs.

•**Anadromous fish funds from the Governor's Office of Species, Minerals and Energy Coordination (OSMEC)** – Idaho's conservation districts located in the Salmon and Clearwater River Basins are eligible to work with OSMEC on funding for projects that benefit salmon and steelhead habitat. The Lemhi District recently completed an off-stream fish habitat-improvement project on private land, featured in the May 2026 issue of *Conservation the Idaho Way*. Note: these funds are not available for other river basins in Idaho. Contact Graham Freeman, graham.freeman@osc.idaho.gov for more information.

•**Bureau of Reclamation WaterSmart grants** – WaterSmart grants can be used for water-measurement devices, telemetry, water-efficiency projects and more. It can be possible to "stack"

federal WaterSmart grants with state grants to increase the total amount of funding available for projects. Be aware that WaterSmart grants may take a long time for approval because an environmental assessment is required for each project.

WaterSMART Water and Energy Efficiency Grants provide 50/50 cost-share funding to irrigation and water districts, tribes, states and other entities with water or power delivery authority. Projects conserve and use water more efficiently, among other things. Projects are selected through a competitive process; focus is on projects that can be completed within two or three years.

•**Your local RC&D:** Reach out to your local RC&D to check on their support services.

The High Country RC&D, for example, provides specialized technical assistance and support for projects that encourage and enhance sustainable economies, ecosystems, and communities. It's a non-profit organization, serving over 271,000 people in Bonneville, Butte, Clark, Custer, Fremont, Jefferson, Lemhi, Madison, and Teton counties. Their services include grant-writing support.

Find your RC&D here: <https://www.narcdc.org/find-your-rcd>.

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

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