

## WHAT'S YOUR CONSERVATION PROJECT?

*maybe we can help!*

By Steve Stuebner

Bruce Stanger runs about 200 head of cattle in the hills south of Bone in Eastern Idaho. Three years ago, he was looking for a way to develop stock water on a former 700-acre dry farm so he could set up a rest-rotation grazing system and increase the productivity of his cattle herd and the land.

Stanger visited with the experts at NRCS and the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission in the Idaho Falls area. NRCS helped him design a new stockwater and rest-rotation grazing system, funded a cost-share project through its Environmental Quality

Incentives Program (EQIP), and the Commission stepped in with a low-interest conservation loan to help Stanger come up with his share of the project cost. It was a great fit for Stanger, both state and federal agencies, and for conservation.

Stanger looked into a solar stock water system, and he found exactly what he was looking for at Independent Drilling in Blackfoot. "They had a complete system, the solar collector, a 110-volt stainless steel pump, and a 2,000-watt inverter as a backup," he said.

He applied for a \$20,000 loan from the Conservation Commission. The conservation plan for his grazing operation, prepared by NRCS, would split the ranch into four fields with cross-fencing. The plan envisioned gravity-fed water lines to the cattle troughs, so he could operate a rest-rotation grazing system. Previously, he was grazing the livestock on Willow Creek, which had water quality issues.

Stanger drilled a well next to an old well that had been drilled for the original homestead on the property in the early 1900s. It turned out to be a good location. He found water only 90 feet deep. The solar system would draw water from the well and feed it into a large, 11,000-gallon storage tank, and then Stanger installed the gravity-fed water lines from the storage tank to two different cattle troughs in his fields.



*Stanger's project features solar panels next to his new well head.*

"It's working great," he says. "It's a fool-proof system. I haven't had any problems with it. And the main thing is, I couldn't have afforded to do this if I had gone to a local bank, because their interest rates would have been a lot higher. The loan with the commission keeps my payments down to a manageable level where I'll be able to pay it off over time."

Stanger also installed bird ramps in the stock water tanks so that wildlife can escape if they happen to fall in. The area where he grazes is used by sage grouse and other wildlife.

He really likes the solar system. "It's pretty amazing. It'll pump 11,000 gallons in two days," he says. "The whole key to a solar livestock watering system is the storage. That way, you don't have to pump water all the time, and you're not dependent on consistent sunshine. Even if it's cloudy, I've got plenty of water in the storage tank to take care of my cows."

RCRDP Funds Available Now The Conservation Commission has funding available and is looking for more applicants for the low-interest loan program, known as the Resource Conservation and Rangeland Development Fund or Program (RCRDP). Though historically thought

### LOW INTEREST CONSERVATION LOANS

Sprinkler Irrigation  
No-Till Drills  
Livestock Feeding Operations  
Fences  
Solar Stock Water  
Pump Systems

INTEREST RATES AS LOW  
AS 2.5%

TERMS 7 TO 15 YEARS



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## What's YOUR Project?, cont. from Page 1

of as financing primarily for irrigation equipment, the program has funded many other types of agricultural improvements on farms, ranches, and private forestlands.

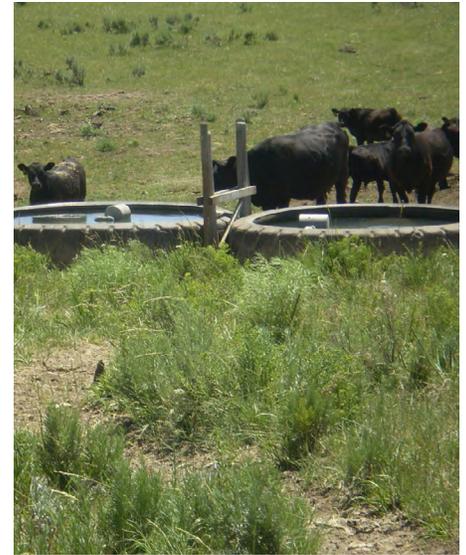
“The conservation loan program really highlights the need for conservation on private lands in Idaho,” says Norman Wright, chairman of the commission. “The interest rates are attractive enough that conservation benefits will pay for themselves and improve the value of your farm, ranch or forest land.”

The Conservation Commission offers loans for a maximum of \$200,000 for

qualifies, we want to help. If it also results in production benefits to the landowner, even better!”

One of the rules with the loan program is that the projects need to be new. The Commission can't fund projects that already are under way, already funded or completed.

“There's a huge range of projects that are eligible for our loan program,” says Terry Hoebelheinrich, the program's loan officer. “We've funded things like pivot sprinklers for irrigation, drip-irrigation systems, no-till drills, solar stockwater systems, fencing to protect riparian areas



*Troughs in operation*

incentive for conservation in the form of cost-share funds. On some projects, the cost-share portion can be up to 50 percent or more, saving producers from financing the total cost of a project.

In some cases, it makes sense for producers to tap into the NRCS program, and then finance their cost-share portion with the Commission's low-interest loan program.

Some other types of projects that Hoebelheinrich thinks could be fit with the Commission's low-interest loan program include farmers in North Idaho applying lime to their fields to increase soil pH. Acidic soils are common in



*Operational solar panes and well*

a single loan, and \$300,000 for an individual. The loans are made at the following rates and terms:

- 2.5% over 7 years
- 2.75% over 10 years
- 3% over 8-12 years
- 3.5% over 13-15 years

“The program was established to increase voluntary conservation in Idaho – good agricultural stewardship,” says Teri Murrison, Commission administrator. “We're as flexible and innovative as we can be. Basically, if an application has quantifiable conservation benefits, satisfies program rules, and the borrower

along streams, even things like Firewise improvements around homes to prevent fire damage.”

Commodity prices generally tend to influence how many people apply for loans. At the present time, commodity prices are down, and so there appears to be less interest. “With agricultural commodities, the volume of applications tends to ebb and flow with prices. Some years, it has exploded with activity when prices are good,” notes Hoebelheinrich.

Farmers and ranchers also like to apply for conservation assistance through the NRCS EQIP program, which provides an



*Storage tank*

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*What's YOUR Project?, cont. from Page 2*

portions of North Idaho, and by applying lime, the conservation improvement would have a long-term improvement for their farms, their crops and the soil.

Projects on forest lands could include things like brush control, Firewise measures that prevent fire danger around structures and improvements, tree-thinning to improve forest health, tree-planting, certain types of thinning equipment, fencing and grazing improvements.

Funding for the Commission's low-interest program has built up over the years from estate tax revenues, explains Ray Houston, budget analyst for Idaho Legislative Services Office. The Legislature supports the program, knowing that conservation projects can bring a positive return that benefits the environment and the economy, he said. "It's an important leg of the stool when it comes to conservation funding for private lands."

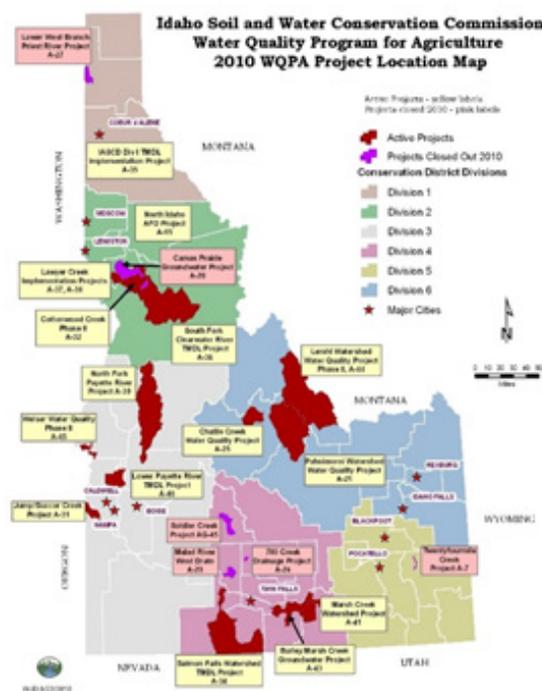
Since the program began in 1985, \$27.4 million has been loaned out to private landowners to increase on the ground, voluntary conservation. All of the projects benefiting natural resources and agricultural production in Idaho. In the end of FY 2016, the RCRDP had \$3 million in loans, and \$6.9 million in cash, available for additional loans.

To generate interest in the loan program, the Commission is actively working on getting the word out through multiple channels. They're doing outreach to all of Idaho's soil and water conservation districts and NRCS personnel throughout Idaho. They're advertising in the print media – Ag specialty publications in particular – social media, and they're spreading the word at conferences and trade shows.

"If a landowner has an idea for a project," says Hoebelheinrich, "I'd encourage him or her to give us a call to discuss how we might help."

Stanger says he had a good experience working with the Commission on his loan. "I really appreciate Terry and all of the help they've provided," he says. "That loan program is a valuable thing!" □

Steve Stuebner writes regularly about agricultural stewardship for Conservation the Idaho Way.



## Budget request for water quality project funding in FY 2019?

We've been asked about submitting a budget request for FY 2019 to fund water quality implementation projects, possibly through the WQPA program. The map above from 2010 shows that year's projects on the Idaho map. Since it was the year the program was closed out, there are fewer projects on it than in previous years.

You'll remember WQPA wasn't funded in FY 2018 because legislators felt it infeasible to fund a position we need to administer the program and the alternative the Commission suggested instead – a direct pass-through to districts – wasn't funded either. Instead, \$500,000 of ongoing water quality implementation funding went to the 319 program and should be available to applicants, including districts, this year.

In the past, WQPA took 100% of one Commission staffer's time to evaluate and award, help with implementation, oversee, and report on projects statewide. Running the program in a similar fashion, it's not feasible to administer it part time, with a private contractor, or by spreading out responsibilities among a number of existing field staff because of the many program requirements and the accountability required (see IDAPA 60.05.03, Rules for Administration of Agricultural

Water Quality Cost-Share Program for Idaho).

Our Board meets this month with IASCD to discuss a FY 2019 budget request for districts and the Trustee and Benefit Fund. IASCD has indicated informally that they prefer WQPA be administered without additional Commission staff. We're working to figure out how to do that and to identify the impacts on Commission staffing and services (district support, programs, etc.).

We'd like to hear directly from districts on this.

- Are you interested in reactivating WQPA/water quality implementation funding?
- Do you support requesting another position, a pass-through directly to districts, or a reduction in the level of other services we provide so we can administer WQPA)?

Please email Delwyne or Maria (Delwyne.Trefz@swc.idaho.gov or Maria.Minicucci@swc.idaho.gov).

We will options to the Board at their next meeting tentatively scheduled for Friday, July 21, 2017, at 1:30 pm MT. Please call in and comment or email in advance. The agenda will be posted on our Website at www.swc.idaho.gov one week prior to the meeting. Stay tuned. □

# GOVERNOR APPOINTS TWO TO COMMISSION

Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter this week re-appointed Chairman H. Norman Wright of American Falls to his second full five-year term, and appointed Jerome County Commissioner Cathy Roemer to serve out the unexpired term of retiring Commissioner Glen Gier of Twin Falls.

Wright joined the Board in 2011. Raised on a dairy farm near Caldwell, he has degrees in business administration and finance from Boise State University. He served on



the American Falls City Council and the Power Board of County Commissioners, and is retired after 33 years with the Farm Service Agency. His term runs through June 2022.

"It's been an honor to serve the conservation community of Idaho the last five years," said Chairman Wright. "There is much more work to be done and I'll continue striving to work with our conservation partners to make Idaho a better place to live."

Commissioner Roemer is a native Idahoan and lifetime resident of the Magic Valley. She has served on the Jerome County Farm Bureau Board for the last 16 years. She was a free-lance agricultural journalist prior to her election to the Jerome County Commission in 2008, and is a strong supporter of the industry. Roemer's the first woman appointed to the Board since its establishment in 1939. Her term expires in 2020.



"I sincerely appreciate being selected to serve on the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission," said Commissioner Roemer. "I look forward to working with the Commission and hope to explore more ways to strengthen partnerships between counties and local conservation districts." □

## PARTNERING WITH NRCS

Due to federal budget issues and a hiring freeze at NRCS, the Commission is stepping up to help NRCS:

1. We've submitted a concept proposal for a \$100,000 National Fish & Wildlife Foundation grant to hire a temporary (2-year) Idaho Sagebrush Landscape Restoration Specialist to work out of our Boise office. The position will work in conjunction with NRCS, the Office of Species Conservation, the Sagegrouse Action Team, private landowners, federal, state, and non-governmental organizations, including districts. It will primarily focus on restoring lost hydrology to wet meadow, mesic, and wetland areas. The Office of Species Conservation is

providing an in-kind match of \$50,000 over two years, as is the Commission.

Our in-kind match will consist of providing office space and IT support in the Water Center, equipment, and various indirect costs. The position will not divert resources from district support or Commission programs.

2. We are working on developing a Contribution Technical Assistance agreement (CTA) with NRCS and hire 4 temporary entry-level employees (effective in July or as soon as possible). These positions will be located in NRCS offices and NRCS will pay the Commission to provide salaries and benefits. NRCS will cover other expenses.

Positions and work locations are planned to include:

- Civil Engineer Tech. Caldwell Service Center;
- Soil Conservationist, Nez Perce Service Center,
- Soil Conservationist, Rigby Service Center, and
- Soil Conservationist/Tribal Liaison, American Falls/ Fort Hall.

If approved, these positions will be temporary state employees for 1-4 years, with the goal for NRCS to hire them permanently in the future.

These employees will be supervised daily by NRCS district conservationists and won't do any work for the Commission. Aside from some bookkeeping and annual paperwork for work plans and evaluations (largely performed by Boise staff), these positions won't divert resources from district support or Commission programs. □

### COMMISSION

- H. Norman Wright, Chairman
- Jerry Trebesch, Vice Chairman
- Leon Slichter, Secretary
- Glen Gier, Commissioner
- Dave Radford, Commissioner
- Teri Murrison, Administrator



SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION

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