

VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP, CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP THRIVE THE IDAHO WAY

This is the second of a two-part series on the history of the Idaho Soil & Water Conservation Commission.

The need to produce more food and fiber for the nation during the World War II era understandably became a higher priority than soil conservation work. Top soil conservation experts enlisted in the military, and the pressure to produce led to plowing up fields that should have been left alone, officials said. Eventually that would change as resources suffered and the conservation partnership intensified its efforts to promote and expand good stewardship.

“Overall, erosion was worse,” said the late Luther Jones, who worked for the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) in Southeast Idaho and Twin Falls during the 1940s. “Many areas that had been planted to grass were plowed out again.... [and] abandoned after four or five years. Lands were left idle and continued to erode.”

But after the war was over, the momentum shifted back to addressing soil and water conservation issues in the Idaho farm and ranch country and in the forests. The formation of the Idaho Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (IASCD) in 1944 helped to accelerate that. And in 1959, the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission finally received funds to hire its first full-time administrator, John “Jack” Fry, who had been secretary of the Squaw Creek Soil Conservation District.

The SCS, IASCD and Conservation Commission worked together to form conservation districts so they could address soil and water conservation issues on farmlands, ranch lands and forest lands. The main driver was that government agencies couldn’t provide financial assistance to farmers for conservation projects unless districts had been formed. By the end of 1966, 54 soil and water conservation districts had been formed statewide. As time went on, the Commission added staff positions to provide technical assistance to districts for conservation projects,



From Left to Right: Cliff Fivecoat, Gem SWCD; Arthur Beal, Squaw Creek SCD; Governor Otter; Daryl Morgan and Mike Fry, Squaw Creek SCD; Carlos Bilbao, Gem County Commissioner; Tim McFarlane, Gem SWCD standing in front of a no-till drill. The Governor rented the no-till drill to drill his pasture.

and the SCS did that as well on a larger scale.

Conservation projects in those early days focused on land-contouring and land-leveling to reduce erosion, range improvements, planting vegetation along waterways, crop rotations, reservoir and canal repairs, water conservation measures, and rest-rotation livestock grazing. The SCS measured the snow pack around the state to help farmers plan and prepare for irrigation season, and it also initiated a statewide soil survey, with the help of the Conservation Commission, to develop detailed soil maps statewide. This helped farmers understand what crops would grow best in various types of soils. In forested areas of the state, students could participate in “Conservation Camp,” an educational program sponsored by the Society of American Foresters and the University of Idaho.

But the conservation partners’ efforts were broadening. In a Conservation Commission 25-year report detailing work programs from 1939 to 1964, it noted that 43 of the 54 soil and water conservation districts in Idaho partnered with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game to plant 1.5 million shrubs

“In the spirit of preserving and protecting water and wildlife, Idaho’s farmers, ranchers and forest landowners have accomplished many voluntary conservation efforts throughout the years. I want to congratulate the Soil and Water Conservation Commission on their 75th anniversary. The next time you have a project around your ranch or farm, you should think about working with your local Soil and Water Conservation District— *I did.*”

—Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter

and trees on farm lands to enhance wildlife habitat and improve upland game hunting on private lands.

In the early 1970s, water quality and other environmental issues became a much bigger issue in the nation and in Idaho. The first Earth Day occurred in 1970, amid much fanfare in the cities, and Congress passed the Clean Water Act in 1972, the first of several landmark environmental bills to pass in the

THE IDAHO FARM BUREAU CELEBRATES 75-YEAR MILESTONE

This is the second of a two-part series on the history of the Idaho Farm Bureau. As conservation was increasingly seen as necessary to protect the land, Idaho farmers saw the need to organize for greater national advocacy.

By Rick Keller
Executive Vice President, CEO

AG IN THE 30s

In the 30's, more than one-third of all the farms in the United States were foreclosed. Commodity prices plummeted. Coupled with the results of the Depression, a series of droughts consumed most of the crops during this period of time. The results of the droughts were devastating dust storms -- more than 40 such storms in 1935 alone.

Part of the Midwest became a dust bowl. One Sunday in April 1935 a black dust cloud swept the nation. It was so dark, one could not see their hand before their face. The wind blew more than 60 mph. On the next morning, a government spokesman testifying before a congressional hearing was citing the need for conservation measures to protect the environment. As he was questioned by doubting congressmen, he pointed out the window as the Black Sunday dust storm enveloped Washington D.C. Congress passed the Soil Conservation Act that year.

Mortgage foreclosures by the banks continued. The Farm Credit Act was passed to refinance many mortgages in danger of going unpaid. Other bills enacted allowed any farmer to buy back a lost farm at a low price over six years at only one percent interest.

Those farmers that remained on the farms were seeking help and assistance from anywhere available. At that time, the U.S. government was the only entity able to assist. Farmers across the country united seeking federal assistance. The American Farm Bureau, the Farmers Union, and the National Grange sought help from the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. Farm parity became the latest solution for agriculture's difficulties.

Parity was a statistical model to find if farm income was keeping up with farm costs. Economists for the U.S. government decided that during the period from 1910-1914,

the prices the farmers got for their crops and livestock were roughly in balance with the prices they had to pay for goods and services they used in the production of crops and livestock and family living. In other words, a farmer's earning power was on par with his or her purchasing power. The concept was actually written into a bill in the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act. USDA would do that by paying farmers NOT to plant some crops and by culling livestock herds. Less supply and a steady demand would raise prices.

The 1933 Farm Bill selected five 'basic' crops -- wheat, corn, cotton, tobacco, and rice -- also hogs and butter fat, to benefit. Any farmer who would reduce his 1933 crop acreage or hog tonnage by 20 percent was eligible for payments roughly equal to the difference between the market price received and the 'parity price.'

Farm organizations jumped on board to enact the bill. The AFBF president was a Democrat from Alabama and the AFBF vice-president was a Republican from Illinois. They worked both sides of the aisle creating the votes necessary to pass the bill.

Since that time, Farm Bureau has strived to work with both political parties for the best interests of agriculture.

THE 1933 FARM BILL

The 1933 Farm Bill was contrary to Farm Bureau policy of today. But at that time commodity prices had declined 65 percent over a decade. Large numbers of bankrupted farmers began emigrating west to California, Idaho, Oregon and Washington. Idaho experienced an 18 percent increase in population in the 30's, while the nation grew only 7 percent. California grew 22 percent.

The Farm Bill or AAA helped some, but as with many government programs, there were unintended consequences. Many farmers signed up, reduced their acreage and livestock production and received the premium for the difference. Six million hogs were destroyed, causing a public relations backlash as many hungry, poverty-stricken city dwellers noted the waste in disgust.

The 1936 U.S. Supreme Court ruled the Farm Bill of 1933 was not constitutional. Memberships in all farm organizations declined due to the reduced number of farms

in the country.

MEETING IN MURTAUGH

Given the environment engulfing agriculture in 1939, 11 individuals from local Farm Bureaus met in Murtaugh to organize the Idaho Farm Bureau to help their members on national issues. The Idaho Farm Bureau was organized "to work for the well-being of farm and ranch families... [and] to bring about and maintain parity prices for agriculture ... and secure a fair share of the national income ... and economical balance between all groups in the nation, to the end that here in America poverty may be forever abolished, and the ideals and philosophies cherished by all free peoples, may be attained and perpetuated."

Idaho county Farm Bureaus were organized and a full-time staff was hired. In subsequent years a legislative committee was formed. Leadership training became ongoing. The needs of the members became identified and enterprises were created to satisfy those requests; including selling fertilizer, insurance, real estate, farm supplies, financing, and marketing. County Farm Bureaus helped elect viable candidates that believed as they did. Farm Bureau began educating Idaho citizens about agriculture via the media, magazines, and classroom instruction. Farm Bureau began litigating issues in the courts. The lists of involvement continued and grew.

Farm Bureau works "for the well-being of farm and ranch families" in Idaho.

Today, the Idaho Farm Bureau has grown to represent 70,334-member/families. Its influence is felt in every county of the state. Its policy development process identifies the collective needs of its 15,144 farm families.

Today's Idaho Farm Bureau is different from those humble beginnings nearly 75 years ago. We are larger. We represent more people. We are involved in more programs demanded by our members, but yet we are still the same. We are working "for the well-being of farm and ranch families" in Idaho. The Farm Bureau is indeed "The Voice of Idaho Agriculture.™" □

COMMISSION *Cont. from Pg. 1*

decade. The Clean Water Act led to more detailed surveys of water quality conditions in Idaho's lakes, rivers and streams.

The Conservation Commission was tasked in the late 1970s to develop the state's first water-quality plan as it related to non-point sources of pollution, meaning problems that came from multiple sources. In 1979, then-Gov. John Evans approved the Idaho Agricultural Pollution Abatement Plan. This led to more federal and state funding for addressing water quality issues related to croplands, rangelands and private forest lands.

At this time, the Conservation Commission became the lead agency for crafting solutions to water quality issues on agricultural lands. The Commission worked closely with IASCD and the districts to develop watershed-based water quality improvement plans and projects. In 1981, the Idaho Legislature authorized funds from the Water Pollution Control Account for grants to local districts. In the next 19 years, 34 planning projects and 48 implementation projects occurred on districts throughout the state. The districts used state funds to provide technical assistance and cost-share funds to farmers and ranchers, and to implement best management practices in high-priority watershed areas.

Under the Clean Water Act, the state of Idaho also was required to develop a list of degraded waters -- called the "303(d) list"-- and create proactive plans to clean up those waters primarily through reducing sediment

flowing into rivers and lakes. A benchmark in that process of calculating sediment loads is called Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL). Several Idaho environmental groups filed a lawsuit in the mid-1990s, challenging the EPA's list of impaired waters in Idaho. A Seattle federal judge ruled in their favor, calling on the state of Idaho to develop new water quality TMDL plans for a greatly expanded list of



impaired waters in the state. The court set an 8-year schedule for completing TMDL plans on 962 listed waters. The Conservation Commission was chosen by the Legislature to take the lead in developing implementation plans for TMDLs, and more funds were approved to bring technical experts on staff to address those issues.

Former Commission employee Tony Bennett, an expert on the ag-related TMDL plans, recalls that the Commission and IASCD estimated it would cost more than \$1 billion to develop TMDL plans for all 962 listed waters. "That definitely got the attention of the governor's office," Bennett recalls, saying it was helpful in obtaining more funds to write the water quality plans.

Nearly two decades after the 1995 court decision, the Conservation Commission has crafted 93 TMDL water quality implementation plans statewide. An additional 17 plans are in progress, with 18 more pending. The Commission has worked closely with DEQ and EPA to ensure the plans met state and federal standards.

Bennett credits a four-way partnership between the Commission, NRCS, IASCD, and the districts for getting the job done. He notes that NRCS was able to bring \$21 million to bear on the water quality issue through its small watershed program, which provided cost-share funds for water-quality projects.

VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION

"The partnership between the Conservation Districts, the Soil and Water Conservation Commission and the Natural Resources Conservation Service goes back to the late 1930s. It has worked for so many years because there is a role for each agency. NRCS couldn't achieve all that we have without the help of our partners - we collaborate to get voluntary, incentive-based conservation work accomplished in Idaho."

*-Jeff Burwell, State Conservationist
NRCS Idaho*

"Voluntary conservation programs are a key part of helping Idaho achieve its water management goals and resolve problems. On the Eastern Snake Plain we have been able to use Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to reduce pumping from the aquifer, and we have been able to use the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) to build infrastructure to carry surface water to groundwater-irrigated lands. Both of these programs, together with other measures such as managed aquifer recharge, are helping us work toward stabilization and sustainability of the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer."

"In the Upper Salmon River Basin, voluntary conservation efforts are helping Idaho meet its obligations to provide flow for anadromous fish passage, while sustaining the agricultural economic base of the region and keeping Endangered Species Act enforcement actions at bay. This creates a tremendous win-win situation. These are just a few examples of the value of voluntary conservation programs, and the achievements the help attain would not be possible without the cooperation of farmers, ranchers, and other landowners across Idaho."

*-Roger Chase, Chairman
Idaho Water Resource Board*

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Cont. on Pg. 4

COMMISSION *Cont. from Pg. 1*

Idaho DEQ Director Curt Fransen credits the Commission for making good progress on the issue.

“Implementing Idaho’s TMDL program involves many people and groups,” Fransen said. “Over the last 75 years the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission has led the effort in promoting voluntary conservation. The Commission has developed agricultural nonpoint source TMDL implementation plans and assisted in delivering agricultural nonpoint source improvement projects. With the Commission and local Soil and Water Conservation Districts’ assistance, Idaho’s surface water quality has improved for all Idahoans to enjoy.”

DEQ officials note that approximately 60 percent of the nonpoint source grant funds have



been implemented on private ag land. Projects have been administered by either the Commission staff or local districts.

“The work on TMDLs—planning and implementation is truly one of our largest challenges, and we work really hard to stay on top of the workload,” Commission Administrator Teri Murrison says.

Beyond the water quality work, the Commis-

sion’s responsibilities today focus on a number of conservation fronts, including:

- **Technical Assistance** to Idaho’s soil and water conservation districts- Assisted 31 districts with projects, 24 new projects, 41 ongoing projects, and served 246 landowners in 2013.
- **Low-interest loan program-** The Conservation Commission currently services 108 active loans totaling about \$4.1 million, making possible 36,010 acres of conservation measures.
- **Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)-** Conserves ground water consumption in the Snake River Plain Aquifer by taking marginal farm ground out of production. In 2013, 159 CREP contracts were signed with landowners, enrolling 17,236 acres in the program.
- **Reducing pollutants in Nitrate Priority Areas -** Treated 35,685 acres with best management practices, resulting in a reduction of 114,797 pounds of nitrates, 24,473 pounds of phosphorus and 137,414 pounds of sediment.

On a broader scale, the four-way conservation partnership is addressing many soil and water conservation issues statewide with hundreds of boots-on-the-ground projects.

“It’s pretty amazing to realize that this four-way partnership between the Commission, NRCS, the districts and landowners has not only survived but thrived over the last 75 years,” Murrison said. “Our farmers, ranchers and forest landowners care deeply about the land. With technical support from the Commission, NRCS, and other agencies and financial support from local, state and federal sources, Idaho’s agricultural producers are making great strides, and they’re doing it because they want to, not because they have to. It just doesn’t get any better than that.” □

VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION

“The connection between agriculture and conservation is simple. The producers in the agricultural industries rely on our natural resources to provide their living and take care of their families. This in my mind makes them the true environmentalist. If they don’t take care of the soil and water and other natural resources on their land then in time they will not have the means to provide for their family or the rest of the world the food that is needed for sustainability”

*-Kit Tillotson, Chairman
Idaho Assoc. of Soil Conservation Districts*

“We all know that agriculture is the backbone of any successful and prosperous country.”

*-Jim Patrick
Idaho State Senator, District 25*

“The agricultural lands of Idaho that provide our food, fiber and fuel are also critical in preserving our wildlife populations and the state’s outdoor heritage. The Department recognizes and appreciates how important landowners are as stewards of wildlife habitat.”

*-Virgil Moore, Director
Idaho Department of Fish & Game*

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SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION

650 West State Street, Room 145 • Boise Idaho 83702 • P: 208-332-1790
F: 208-332-1799 • info@swc.idaho.gov • swc.idaho.gov

Conservation the Idaho Way: Sowing Seeds of Stewardship