

A LEGACY: SOWING SEEDS OF PARTNERSHIP, STEWARDSHIP

Soil and water conservation in Idaho has come a long way since the beginning of the agriculture-conservation era in the 1930s. Today, as the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission celebrates its 75th anniversary, a strong, four-way partnership between the Commission, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the state's 50 soil and water conservation districts and private landowners supports literally hundreds of boots-on-the-ground conservation projects throughout the state every year. The projects conserve topsoil, reduce soil erosion, improve water quality, enhance fish and wildlife habitat and emphasize best management practices on Idaho's farm lands, ranches and forest lands.

HISTORY

In the Dust Bowl-era of the 1930s during the Great Depression, Idaho's farmers struggled to stay afloat financially due to poor commodity prices and severe droughts that reduced crop yields. By 1934, crop losses were estimated to be \$22.4 million statewide. "Farmers were unable to pay their mortgages, much less practice conservation," according to "Serving People and the Land: A History of Idaho's Soil Conservation Movement", authored by the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts.

Hugh Hammond Bennett, a North Carolina-based soil scientist, was the father of the soil conservation movement in the United States. Twenty years into his career as a soil scientist, Bennett wrote "Soil Erosion: A National Menace", a USDA publication in 1928. The paper was a cry for action that immediately drew the attention of the U.S. Congress. Within five years, Congress created the Soil Erosion Service, the forerunner to the Soil Conservation Service and NRCS, and Bennett was the agency's first director.



Hugh Hammond Bennett
Photo courtesy NRCS



CCC Camp in Moscow
Photo courtesy NRCS

The first order of business was to conduct soil erosion surveys nationwide. In 1934, Idaho's survey underscored serious soil erosion problems:

- 27.2 million acres of Idaho, or roughly half the state, was suffering from sheet erosion. More than 7.2 million acres had lost three-fourths of the topsoil.
- Severe gullying was discovered on 12.9 million acres.
- Wind erosion affected 7.9 million acres, of which 620,000 acres of land was essentially destroyed.
- There also were severe erosion issues on forest lands from logging, log-skidding and road-building, and on rangelands from overgrazing.

During the mid-1930s, 10 different Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp locations were established in Idaho to work on a variety of projects, including erosion control. The first CCC camp was established in Moscow in May 1934 to work on soil-erosion demonstration projects on the Palouse River.

Camps were also established in Genesee, Pocatello, Emmett and Weiser.

The notion of conserving topsoil was embraced by farmers and government officials. "The call to action by SCS to save the

soil as a national heritage was the most easily understood and widely accepted objective of the agricultural programs inaugurated during the 1930s," the authors wrote in "Serving People and the Land."

Perhaps Hammond put it best, telling farmers and ranchers to, "Take care of the land and the land will take care of you."

Against this backdrop, the first Idaho director of the SCS, R. Neil Irving, actively lobbied the Idaho Legislature to pass state legislation to foster the creation of soil conservation districts in the late 1930s. As

"Take care of the land and the land will take care of you."

a matter of national policy, the SCS was not supposed to work on soil conservation projects in various counties until a soil and water conservation district had been established.

ENABLING LEGISLATION

In 1939, influential Idaho legislator Arthur

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For more information, contact the ISWCC office at 332-1790 or email alicia.hardy@swc.idaho.gov

THE IDAHO FARM BUREAU CELEBRATES 75-YEAR MILESTONE

Concurrent with the formation of the Commission, the Idaho Farm Bureau started from scratch amid tough economic times in 1939.

By Rick Keller
Executive Vice President, CEO

The year 2014 is a milestone for the Idaho Farm Bureau. Seventy-five years ago, this coming September 15th, in 1939, a small group of community leaders met in a hall in Murtaugh, Idaho and organized the Idaho Farm Bureau Federation. The local community Farm Bureaus of Murtaugh, Filer, Grace, Tyhee and Lava Hot Springs sent a total of 11 representatives and gathered on a busy Friday to unite and affiliate with the American Farm Bureau and “to work for the well-being of farm and ranch families.” A representative of the American Farm Bureau from Walla Walla, Wash., was also in attendance. From this small beginning, the Idaho Farm Bureau institution was born in the state.

Throughout 2014, Farm Bureau will be celebrating these humble beginnings

and the years which followed. We will reminisce about Farm Bureau’s successes and challenges. We’ll recall fondly the individuals who sacrificed their time and energies for the cause of bettering the lives of their fellow farmers and ranchers. We will ponder the principles and values they embedded into this organization and muse what has been referred to as “the spirit of



Foreclosures on the Farm

Farm Bureau.” We will honor those who have gone on before us, recognize those who are currently serving and prepare others to carry forward the ideals that came from those who preceded us. We look forward to celebrating in 2014 lest we forget and treasure how Farm Bureau came to be.

What precipitated that long ago assembly on a busy fall day when so many were harvesting the season’s crops? What was the impetus and urgency for the meeting? To answer these questions, we must know of the conditions that were afflicting agriculture in 1939.

There was an absence of organized county Farm Bureaus. The Idaho Farm Bureau was created by community or local Farm Bureaus. We know from newspaper clippings, community Farm Bureaus were in at least 19 counties. Nearly all local Farm Bureaus were organized to benefit and educate fellow farmers and ranchers on enhanced and improved farming practices through partnerships with local extension agents.

Second, the plight of farmers and ranchers in the 20’s and 30’s was bleak. The difficulties farmers and ranchers experienced most often were the result of actions and conditions generated thousands of miles away from their farms, way beyond their

control or influence. Farmers and ranchers did not need to unite to address concerns in their counties or the state. Their difficulties resulted from national economies and policies.



*Rick Keller
Photo courtesy IFB*

A review of the state

of affairs in agriculture is warranted. Two decades earlier, 1910-1914 was known as the “Golden Age of Agriculture.” Farming and ranching was profitable. The farmlands of Europe and Russia were ravaged by war and the United States fed the world.

Crops received premium prices and farmers here prospered. With good prices, American farmers mortgaged their farms to expand and meet the growing demand. Farm machinery improved efficiencies significantly.

When the war farm commodity prices declined drastically, placing many U.S. farmers at risk, unable to meet the heavy mortgages they entered into to expand their operations.

For those who could, farms expanded, planting in hope increased acreage and yields would offset the declining commod-



ity prices. And then, in late October 1929 began the most devastating stock market crash in the history of the United States. The crash signaled the beginning of the 10-year Great Depression that affected all industrial countries in the world.

Next issue: Part Two of this story will feature a closer look at the link between agriculture and conservation. □

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CONSERVATION *Cont. from Pg. 1*

Snow carried a bill called the Idaho Soil Conservation District Law. The law established the Idaho Soil Conservation Commission and soil conservation districts, setting forth their respective purposes and responsibilities. It called for a three-member commission, to be appointed by the governor, an administrative officer, and technical experts as necessary, as well as the formation of local soil conservation districts. Its responsibilities included:

- Coordinating soil conservation programs in Idaho with the federal government and the SCS in particular.
- Encouraging the formation of soil conservation districts in Idaho.
- Offering assistance to supervisors of soil conservation districts and
- Keeping district supervisors informed of the activities and experience of other districts to “facilitate an interchange of advice and experience between such districts and cooperation between them.”
- Establishing districts.

James Rabdau, who ran a CCC camp in Moscow and later worked as a soil conservationist in multiple locations in Idaho, said the SCS was very instrumental in creating the Idaho Soil Conservation District Law.

“The reason it had to be passed was that SCS couldn’t work on private land unless there was a district,” Rabdau said in a history of the SCS/NRCS. “While SCSers were working with farmers in the CCC designated areas, Neil Irving was working around the clock in Boise trying to convince the Legislature to pass the State Soil Conservation District Law. It was a hard job. Many counties in the state knew nothing of SCS or that they had an erosion problem.”

Rabdau notes that the formation of districts was key to gain the cooperation and trust of farmers and landowners. “Whoever figured out the district idea was a wise person indeed. Without the grass roots nonpartisan basis of districts, SCS would have been gone many years ago. And because of districts, SCS will continue.”

Teri Murrison, the current administrator of the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission, says the importance of voluntary locally-led conservation on private lands continues to this day. “Idaho farm-

ers, ranchers and landowners are the most important and necessary partners in the whole four-way conservation partnership,” Murrison says. “Without their cooperation, boots-on-the-ground conservation projects would not be possible.”

The first Commission members were Harold Nagle, a farmer from Parker (near St. Anthony), J.M. Isaacson, a rancher in Malad, and E.J. Iddings, Dean of the University of Idaho College of Agriculture in Moscow. Nagle was elected as chairman. Oddly enough, the Legislature did not appropriate any funds for the commission to operate. Nevertheless, the commission moved forward with its job, and worked on forming districts and attending meetings at the commissioners’ own expense.

The first soil and water conservation districts to form in Idaho occurred in areas



*Erosion Gully in the Palouse, 1934.
Photo courtesy NRCS*

where CCC camps had been established and where enthusiasm for conservation work was high, according to historical papers. Latah County was a leader because of farmers’ concerns about soil erosion, plus it had a CCC camp in Moscow and Genesee. In 1936, three years before the state law was passed, farmers from various towns voluntarily formed conservation groups representing 95 percent of the cropland in Latah County.

What was the impetus? A 1940 hearing report said, “Eighty percent of the county’s cropland had lost 25 to 75 percent of its topsoil. Gullies were common. Fires, overgrazing and clear-cutting had severely eroded wooded areas. The many CCC demonstration projects showed farmers solutions to these problems.”



*First Idaho Soil Conservation Commission
From left to right: E.J. Iddings, R. Neil Irving, J.M. Isaacson, and Harold Nagle.
Photo courtesy NRCS*

The Latah Soil and Water Conservation District was organized in May 1940 and went to work.

The Portneuf Soil and Water Conservation District was another pioneering district in Idaho. State law required at least 25 farmers to sign a petition to form a district before things could move forward. In 1939, a meeting of farmers in Lava Hot Springs brought together 63 signatures to form a district in Bannock County. The Portneuf Soil and Water Conservation District was formed in May 1940.

It’s interesting to note that while Idaho’s first soil and water conservation districts were being formed, farmers also joined together to form the Idaho Farm Bureau in September 1939 (see story, page 2) “to work for the well-being of farm and ranch families.”

Fish and wildlife conservation also was important to Idahoans in view of the creation of the Idaho Fish and Game Commission by citizens initiative in 1938. Idaho sportsmen feared that politics were causing undue influence on the management of fish and wildlife resources, and through the citizens initiative, they formed the independent Fish and Game Commission, with members to be appointed by the governor.

Hammond’s call to action on the farm front was eagerly accepted and the SCS quickly developed engineering techniques to provide guidance to districts on solving erosion problems through demonstration projects on farm lands. And Congress passed the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, which brought order and much-needed management to the practice of livestock grazing on Bureau of Land Management property and on the national forests man-

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CONSERVATION *Cont. from Pg. 3*

aged by the U.S. Forest Service.

By 1944, the Idaho Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (IASWCD) was formed to provide an independent voice for conservation districts in the state and to work closely with the Conservation Commission. The organization provided a forum for district officials to share common problems, strategies and techniques. It also was helpful in assisting the Commission in forming new districts.

Twelve years after the state soil conservation law was passed, 31 soil and water conservation districts had been formed in Idaho, covering nearly two-thirds of the state's agricultural lands.

Among early district priorities were:

- Addressing the impacts of flooding--in crop fields, earthen ditches, streams and rivers.
- Building irrigation systems
- Conserving irrigation water
- Managing livestock grazing

- Contour leveling of farm fields
- Crop rotation

Next issue: Part Two of our historical look at voluntary conservation in Idaho will track the evolution of Ag-related water-quality planning and implementation in the last four decades and highlight the importance of expanded conservation partnerships in the 21st century. □

SAVE THE DATE!

Conservation the Idaho Way Day 75th Anniversary set for Feb. 12 at the Idaho Statehouse

Come and help celebrate "Conservation the Idaho Way" Day in the Capitol with the Conservation Commission and many of its conservation partners on Wednesday, Feb. 12, on the 4th floor of the Idaho Statehouse. The Day in the Capitol will include a 75th anniversary luncheon and program that will highlight Idaho's many agriculture-related conservation success stories.

The Commission has invited key conservation partners including the Idaho Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, the Idaho Farm Bureau, Idaho Cattle Association, Idaho Department of Agriculture, Idaho Department of Water Resources, Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, Idaho Rangeland Resource

Commission, and Idaho Fish and Game, among others, to participate in the event and share information about successful conservation projects throughout the state.

Idaho elected officials, legislators, soil and water conservation district officials, conservation groups, and the general public are invited to attend. Please contact the ISWCC office for more information at alicia.hardy@swc.idaho.gov or 332-1790. □



Photo courtesy Jake Putnam, IFB.

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