

## CREP PROGRAM HELPS REDUCE COMPETITION FOR SNAKE RIVER WATER

By Steve Stuebner

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) was launched in 2006 in Idaho to take marginal farm ground out of production and reduce the amount of ground water being drawn from the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer. Nearly eight years later, the program has taken more than 17,000 acres of farm land out of production under 160 contracts with Snake Plain farmers.

The ultimate goal of the program is to reduce ground water irrigation on up to 100,000 acres of farm ground in the Snake Plain and reduce ground water withdrawals by 200,000 acre-feet of water annually. Approximately 35,000 acre-feet of water has been conserved through the CREP program so far.

The USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) offers the CREP program and provides the primary financial support, while the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission is the lead agency working on program implementation, along with its partners, the Idaho Department of Water



*The field pictured has been taken out of production through the CREP program and planted with native grass.*



*The Commission's CREP Coordinator, Chuck Pentzer, kneels in a CREP field that has been planted with native grass.*

Resources, Idaho Fish and Game, Pheasants Forever and the Idaho Groundwater Appropriators.

The FSA provides payments to participating farm producers as an incentive to participate. The FSA pays about \$135/acre for taking marginal land out of production. Farmers can enroll in CREP to take the "corners" of farm fields out of production -- in fields that are watered

with circular pivot sprinklers. Other producers may apply to take whole fields out of production consisting of more than 100 acres.

Lately however, the commodity prices that farmers receive from growing crops far outpaces the payments offered by the CREP program, so the number of farmers and acres enrolled have been declining. Last year, 17,227 acres of farm land were enrolled in the program, compared to 19,818 acres in 2007, a change of 13 percent.

"We were inundated with applications in the first three years," says Chuck Pentzer, coordinator of the CREP program for the Conservation Commission. "The program

## CREP PROGRAM *Cont. from Pg. 1*

is well-known to the farmers. It's got a lot of support. But it's hard to compete with the commodity prices right now."

Rocky Hagen, a Jerome County farmer, said ground water levels in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer continue to decline, so the need for the program continues to be strong. "We're still going backwards," he says. "All of the things we're doing to help still aren't enough."



*Sandhill Cranes are spotted in a field taken out of production through the CREP program and planted with native grass.*

For example, ground water wells in the Hazelton-Butte area are showing declining water levels, Hagen said, and farmers in the A&B Irrigation District are having to go deeper and deeper to find water every year.

"Everybody needs to realize they're part of the problem and that they could be part of the solution," he says.

The CREP program emerged at a time when it became clear that the Snake River and the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer were over-appropriated, meaning there are more demands for water than the river and the aquifer can support on a sustained basis. When push comes to shove, watermasters have to shut down farmers with junior water rights to keep senior water rights holders whole. They follow the dates when water rights were established-- first in time, first in right.

The Snake River Basin Adjudication, a legal process of determining water rights throughout the Snake River Basin, has helped in sorting out the priorities for water rights over the last 20+ years. If there's a dispute over the legalities, then a water dispute may go to court.

Pentzer notes that the CREP program was created as a "safety net" in the event that a major water dispute occurred. And as things turned out, Gary Spack-

man, director of the Idaho Department of Water Resources, made a big water call in January 2014, ruling that Rangen, a fish farm company in the Twin Falls area, was entitled to 3.4 cubic feet per second of water, and ground water pumpers in the area were required to reduce their consumption to meet that order.

Because the CREP program has been in place, the ground water pumpers provided the information to IDWR about the amount of land that's been taken out of production and

the associated water savings, and that provided credit for 2.9 cfs of the water call, said Lynn Tominaga, executive director of the Idaho Ground Water Appropriators. "That took care of most of the call," he said.

If CREP had not been in place, the impact of the water call would have been widespread, harming the \$1 billion, eight-county Magic Valley agri-

cultural economy and community drinking water supplies, Tominaga said.

There may be efforts to contribute more state or federal funds to accelerate the CREP program and bring more marginal farm land out of production and conserve water, he said, depending on how some of the water disputes shake out. Other alternatives to create more water for surface water irrigators include recharging the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer and building more storage projects at existing dams or building new ones, such as the Galloway Dam or Teton Dam proposals.

"You can't blame somebody for fighting for their water rights," Hagen says. "But we need to all work together rather than filing more lawsuits."

One of the challenges associated with the CREP program is converting former ag lands to native grasslands, as is required, to create wildlife habitat on idled lands. Pentzer and other ISWCC staff work with landowners to help establish native seedings in the spring -- without the aid of irrigation.

"Native grasses are hard to get established," Pentzer notes. "The biggest complaint about the program is the requirement of planting and growing native grasses."

"The ground can look pretty tough and



*The corner field pictured has been taken out of production through the CREP program and planted with wild rye.*

*Cont. on Pg. 3*

## CREP PROGRAM *Cont. from Pg. 2*

the neighbors complain about weeds," adds Hagen. "There's a reason we irrigate in this area."

But Pentzer and others help the producers with dryland seed mixes, and they usually plant in the late fall or winter, when weather conditions are best. Over time, the native grass seedings have been getting established. "In over half the acres we have enrolled, we have native grasses established," Pentzer says.

Pentzer and other staff members conduct field checks several times a year

to monitor the seedings and make sure producers are not watering the fields, grazing them with livestock, or placing unauthorized items in the fields such as hay stacks or vehicles.

The CREP program is going well overall, Pentzer says. It's not only conserving ground water, but idling the farm lands and planting them with native grasses also benefits wildlife populations and reduces wind and soil erosion. "The program has a lot of benefits," he says. "I hope enrollment goes back up." □

**For more information regarding the Farm Service Agency, visit:**

[www.fsa.usda.gov](http://www.fsa.usda.gov)

**For more information regarding the Eastern Snake River Plain Aquifer, visit:**

[www.deq.idaho.gov](http://www.deq.idaho.gov)



### Staff profile

## ROB SHARPNACK

### Water Quality Resource Conservationist

*Where do you live and work?* My family and I live just north of the town of Shoshone. My office is located in Shoshone just a few miles away.

*Briefly describe your job responsibilities.* I work in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). I provide the soil and water conservation districts near Shoshone and on up to Salmon with technical assistance. I work on developing plans to implement Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) in privately owned agricultural areas.

*What do you like about your job?* The people I am working with are fantastic, both within the agency and outside of it. I also love the fact that I am able to travel throughout this state and experience the natural beauty that is all around us.

*What are your passions in life?* I like working on projects that improve the quality of life around me whether they

are at home or out in the community.

*What is your favorite thing about Idaho?* Being out in the mountains and desert and exploring. There is so much public land to enjoy here in Idaho; most people in Idaho do not realize how good things really are here. If you enjoy the outdoors on almost any level, whether it is just site-seeing or kayaking, mountain climbing, hunting or fishing, there is something great you can do near to where you are almost anywhere in Idaho.

*Tell us about your family.* My wife Karen and I have been married almost 7 years, and we have three large Labrador Retrievers, of all colors, Finn, Tess and Jax.

*If money were no object, what would you do for the farms, ranches or natural resources in your area?* Help develop infrastructure for large scale effective re-charge efforts in the Magic Valley. □

# GOODING HIGH SCHOOL WINS 2014 IDAHO ENVIROTHON

The 2014 Idaho Envirothon was held on May 5-6 at Living Waters Ranch in Challis. Seventeen high school teams competed in various natural resources-related stations, including wildlife, soils/land use, forestry, aquatic ecology, and sustainable agriculture.

Gooding High School's 'Team A' placed first, earning a total of 635.6 points in the competition, as well as earning first place in the Conservation Project Poster competition. Gooding's 'Team C' placed second in the competition, with Weiser High School placing third. Dennis Technical Education Center 'Team A', Jerome High School, and Dennis Technical Education Center 'Team D' placed 4th, 5th, and 6th place, respectively.

The Idaho Envirothon competition is a collaborative effort. This year's event was sponsored by the Idaho Envirothon Committee, in cooperation with the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts (IASCD), and 35 contributing Soil and Water Conservation Districts, as well as multiple other community volunteers. This year, Commissioners Norman Wright and Dave Radford, alongside Administrator Teri Murrison, served as judges.

The Idaho Envirothon has taken place for over 22 years, bringing natural resources conservation education to students throughout the state. For more information regarding the Idaho Envirothon, visit <http://idahoenvirothon.weebly.com/>. □



2014 Envirothon Winners, Gooding Team A (from left to right): Dawson Freiberg, JoAnna Jensen, Nicolai Lohse, Jose Hernandez, Brianna Reed, Alyssa Freeman, and Advisors Becky Freiberg and David Freiberg.



2nd Place Winners, Gooding Team C.



3rd Place Winners, Weiser High School.

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