

WOMEN IN VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION

Ag, stewardship, common threads

This month, Conservation the Idaho Way focuses on five women who work in voluntary conservation from all points of the compass in Idaho. We are profiling three female district supervisors, a full-time ag conservation professional and a part-time professional. In speaking to these women, we searched for a common thread to define what makes them successful. What we found is that coming from an agricultural background and being knowledgeable about conservation programs -- plus, having a passion for voluntary conservation -- are all critical elements in moving the dial in a positive direction to improve our environment and enhance and modernize Idaho's farms and ranches.

By Steve Stuebner

Kathy Weaver, a supervisor on the East Side Soil and Water Conservation District who also worked as a conservation professional for the Conservation Commission for 19 years, learned about the importance of conservation from her father and grandfather. Her grandfather helped organize the West Side Soil and Water Conservation District near Idaho Falls when she was a kid. "I was raised on a farm, where my love for agriculture and understanding of conservation came from," she says. "I learned what it meant to care for the land.

Jane Dougherty Sandstrom, a supervisor on the Lemhi Soil and Water Conservation District, volunteered to serve as on the district board because of her roots in agriculture, growing up on a dairy farm in Cambridge, Minn. "Agriculture always



Jane Dougherty Sandstrom, a supervisor on the Lemhi Soil and Water Conservation District, is pictured in the field.

has been near and dear to my heart," Sandstrom says. "I wanted to make sure that farmers and ranchers have a voice."

Sandstrom and her husband, Mike, moved to Salmon, Idaho by choice after they fell in love with the area. Mike had traveled to Salmon to go elk hunting, and they liked the rural setting and friendly people. A mechanical engineer, Sandstrom has strong expertise to draw from when looking at conservation projects.

"Conservation is not gender biased, it simply doesn't matter if you're male or female"

Billie Brown

"On the Lemhi District, we have a neat mix of ages and backgrounds and perspectives," she says. "I don't think being a woman is that different from being a man. We're all accepted for our knowledge and expertise."

And Sandstrom uses that engineering expertise when she reviews conservation projects, contracts, drawings and more. "It's a unique perspective that I think our other supervisors appreciate," she said. Recently, the district had an opening for a supervisor, and the board members said, "Maybe we need to start looking at more women," Sandstrom says. "They bring a different perspective and broaden the pool."

Loretta Strickland, a full-time water quality specialist for the Conservation Commission, is a young mom with a 2-year-old son who also runs a farm and ranch with her fiancé near Emmett, and **Lisa Transtrum**, a part-time administrative assistant for the Bear Lake Soil and Water Conservation District, is raising six kids while running a farm/ranch operation with her husband on the shores of Bear Lake.

These women face challenges every day balancing their families, farms and careers. "I think woman struggle a little bit more because we are raising kids and there are lots of chores to do when we come home,"

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Strickland says. "Having a 2-year-old is a tough age, but I know if I can push through this, it'll get easier."

That said, Strickland appreciates running the ranch with her fiancé. "It's so much easier being with someone who has the same passions about farming and ranching that I do," she says. "I'm also very fortunate to have my mom living near us. She helps with my son, and she can help watch the cows during calving season."

With more than an armful of kids ranging from age 7 to 20, plus horses, cattle and dogs, Transtrum is glad she works part-time for the Bear Lake district so she can attend parent-teacher conferences, football games, rodeos and community events. "I like the flexibility that allows me to be a mom," she says.

But she takes her job very seriously, and sometimes she may put in 40+ hours in a week to work on weed-control projects, water-quality projects, fuels-reduction projects, or outreach and education projects in the schools. "On busy days, I come home tired and grumpy and I want everything to go smoothly. It can be pretty stressful."

The other women profiled in this story also are raising families or their kids are grown, so it's not as big of an issue now as it was when their kids were younger.



Loretta Strickland, Water Quality Resource Conservationist for the Commission, pictured here on her ranch near Emmett.

This is true for **Billie Brown**, chair of the Benewah Soil and Water Conservation District, who has two grown children, but she's a tireless advocate for voluntary conservation in many respects. She works full-time for Potlatch Corporation in St. Maries, she's chair of the Benewah district, she's vice president of the Idaho Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (IASCD), and she serves as the Idaho delegate for the National Association of Soil Conservation Districts.

She modestly calls her role in all of these conservation posts her "hobby job."

Unlike the other four women profiled in this story, Brown wasn't raised on a farm or a ranch, but she did grow up in Burns, Oregon, a ranching community in the eastern part of the state. In the late 1980s, she was living in the Orofino area, working as a dispatcher for the county sheriff. After nearly 10 years as a dispatcher, she was ready to find something different.

"I walked into the Clearwater district office and said so, you guys work with dirt, right? And they were very gracious, they said, 'we call it soil.' I literally started cold in the conservation field, and grew to love being a part of the commitment and dedication landowners and operators had to the land and natural resources."

Brown jumped in with both feet, working for the Clearwater Soil and Water Conservation District on water quality projects via the state agricultural water quality program and securing 319 grants from the EPA. She landed more than \$1.7 million in water quality grants to get a number of projects moving on Clearwater County farms.



Billie Brown, chair of the Benewah Soil and Water Conservation District, leads a division meeting.

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In her last three years as a Clearwater SWCD employee, she served as president of the Idaho District Employees Association (IDEA). Her goal as the association president was to further develop district employee skill levels to provide a stronger and broader base for the state's 51 soil and water conservation districts, she says.

Brown still wants to continually work to grow the knowledge and skill base for district employees advancing the cause of conservation statewide. "District employees are the front line soldiers for a conservation district; success or failure may be determined by that initial landowner/operator contact."

"Conservation is not gender biased, it simply doesn't matter if you're male or female," she says. "We all need to sell the conservation message, not only to landowners and operators, but to our youth, to legislators, business owners and operators; to anyone who will listen. Again, it's been my experience that if you bring commitment and a willingness to further promote the wise use of our natural resources to the table, gender takes a back seat."

Indeed, learning how to work with farmers and ranchers is a huge part of getting projects installed at the ground-level, says **Kathy Weaver**. She worked as a conservation professional in the 1980s, when the implementation of the Clean Water Act was just beginning to occur on Idaho farms and ranches. "The conservation district didn't approach them with a ticket book in one hand and a sidearm in the other," she joked. "The District Supervisors would say, this is what we see coming down the road, and here are a number of voluntary cost-share programs and technical assistance that are available for landowners. If this sounds interesting to you, let the district help you get started."

Weaver remembers working on a number of cost-share programs with farmers and ranchers to install best-management practices on dryland and irrigated farms. Projects included erosion-control on dryland farms to reduce sediment entering the Ririe Reservoir with the use of conservation

tillage, building sediment basins, terracing, and strip-cropping grassed waterways.

When she worked as staff for the Conservation Commission, Weaver also worked with the Lemhi and Custer Soil and Water Conservation Districts in the early days of the "Model Watershed" project, now known as the Upper Salmon Basin Watershed Project (USBWP). She was impressed with how proactive ranchers were in wanting to improve fish-passage and fish habitat for imperiled salmon and steelhead.

"Having been raised on a farm, I understood farmers and ranchers," she says. "You need to listen to them. They can teach you a whole lot."

In the Salmon area, Idaho Fish and Game biologist, state and federal agency staff, and the environmental community listened to ranchers. Through negotiations and

"That project worked because of the combined efforts and input from many interests. By working together, the USBWP participants learned how they could shape things to help the fish and keep the ranchers in business," says Weaver, who was inducted into the Eastern Idaho Agriculture Hall of Fame this year. "If there's one conservation effort in this state that's a total win-win, that's the one."

Jane Sandstrom has seen that spirit of cooperation two decades later in working as a supervisor on the Lemhi district. Many different partnering agencies contribute to the fish projects to help make them possible and successful. "It's pretty impressive to see everyone with such a positive attitude," she says. "The projects are there, and the money is there, and the fact that there are so many partners involved makes it really interesting and fulfilling."

One of Sandstrom's goals is to expand the scope of the Lemhi district's projects to things beyond fish recovery, including education and outreach in the schools, soil health, water quality projects and range management. The district offers a \$500 scholarship for the Lost River Grazing Academy each year, for example. "It's open to anybody, but it's geared to younger ranchers. The scholarship covers the cost of attending the academy," she says.

Sandstrom helps spread the word about the district's programs through her contacts in the community. She has an eighth-grader, so she's active in the schools. She works part-time for the Salmon-Challis national forest, so she meets people through that job, and she volunteers as an election judge in Lemhi County.



Kathy Weaver, of the East Side Soil and Water Conservation District, with her fellow supervisors.

planning and USBWP started to develop plans to implement fish-enhancement projects with Bonneville Power Administration funds. The financial and technical assistance were key components of the initial and continued success of the USBWP. The ranchers wanted to help the fish, but they also wanted to protect the economic integrity of their ranching operations.

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"I want to broaden things out so we're doing more than just working on fish," she says.

Transtrum doesn't have that problem with the Bear Lake district because she juggles a multiplicity of activities-- from a diversity of conservation projects in the field to outreach and education with the public and in the public schools. She's partnered with other districts in SE Idaho to get the word out on the importance of managing private lands to create defensible space around homes in the event of a fire, and she talks to school kids about the districts many conservation projects and gets kids to participate in poster contests.

"In the elementary schools, we talk about the importance of planting trees, and in the middle schools, we talk about how to control weeds, and in the high schools, we do speech contests," she says. "We hit the



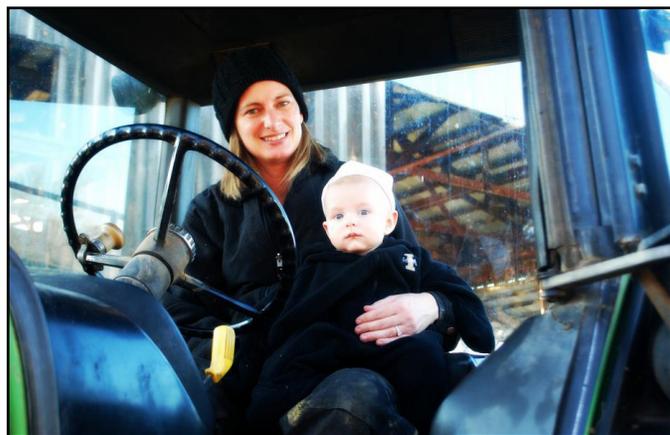
Lisa Transtrum, of the Bear Lake Soil and Water Conservation District, working cows on her ranch in Bear Lake.

K-12 schools as much as we can."

A native of Tremonton, Utah, **Transtrum** grew up showing horses and working on her grandfather's farm. She went to Utah State University, thinking she'd study to be a veterinarian, but after she married her husband, **Todd**, they settled on their farm and ranch by Bear Lake, and began raising their kids. **Todd** oversees noxious weed control for Bear Lake County. **Lisa** has to balance a lot in her life, but overall, she likes working with farmers and ranchers to make things better.

"I really enjoy working with people," she says. "I like being able to help farmers and ranchers with their operations. Hopefully our projects make things easier for them, and if they're happy, it puts a smile on my face."

Strickland also has a deep background in agriculture, having grown up on the small farm and ranch that she operates today. Her father died when she was in high school, and her mother offered her the farm on Van Deusen Road when she was in college. She got a bachelor's degree from the University of Idaho in agri-business. She got a part-time job with the Gem Soil and Water Conservation District after finishing college, and she ran the ranch on the side. When a full-time job came open with the Conservation Commission in Emmett, she leaped at the chance. "I'm very lucky to have a good job in a county that doesn't have a lot of job opportunities," she says.



Strickland driving tractor with her son, Sawyer.

As part of her duties, **Strickland** writes ag water quality implementation plans. She just completed one for Little Willow Creek in Payette County. The TMDL was approved last December, which allows the Payette Soil and Water Conservation District to apply for 319 grants to do boots-on-the-ground projects to improve water quality.

She finds that her background in agriculture help when she talks to farmers and ranchers about cost-share programs that can benefit their land and improve the environment. "My ag background is a huge bonus," she says. "It makes it pretty easy to talk to farmers and ranchers. I've got my own challenges dealing with irrigation systems on my farm, so it makes it pretty easy to talk about that stuff with other landowners. It's the best part of my job." **Strickland** speaks for all of the women featured in this article when she says she feels lucky to be able to work in the field of voluntary conservation -- a pursuit that she's passionate about. "I'm pretty blessed," she says. □

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