

Henry's Fork Watershed Council Annual Watershed Conference

Thursday, December 12, 2019

Participants began registering at 9 a.m. at the SpringHill Suites in Rexburg.

Aaron Dalling of the Fremont-Madison Irrigation District (FMID), called the meeting to order. Participants introduced themselves. Aaron called for a moment of silence so that participants could prepare themselves for a respectful and objective meeting, noting that it has been a tradition of the council since its inception. Aaron explained that the intent of Watershed Council meetings and conferences are to work together and better our communities. Aaron then opened up the meeting to any announcements or comments.

Community Building

USGS is moving locations and the new office will be ready by October 1, 2020. The new office will be near the BLM and USFS offices.

Aaron Dalling, FMID shared that the goal for today's conference is to see how we can continue to work together, improve how we work together, and better understand the new Farm Bill.

Keynote Speaker

Zak Miller, Idaho Farm Bureau

Idaho Agriculture is #3 in Western states in net farm income per capita and #5 largest agriculture economy in the nation. Agriculture is a significant part of Idaho's GDP, contributing about \$10 billion in added value, provides 123,000 jobs, and 1 of every 8 jobs is agriculture related. These are impressive figures, but it is also important to discuss the "why". Agriculture and those who work on and in the river are similar in that the river means something and there is passion in what they do, everyone wants to protect and conserve. For Zak, the "why" has to do with seeing cows make it through the winter, being able to start planting and seeing the potential, and seeing crops growing out his office window. His "why" also has to do with composting and building a soil profile because you need healthy soil to be successful. Knowing how much you put in and seeing how much you get back can be incredibly rewarding.

For Zak, the big picture is to maintain sustainability and be able to carry on to the next generation. Agriculture helps to build community, family, and build character. Everything comes back to the river as the source of water for all. Farmers take the values and lessons learned and then step up and continue to figure out how to improve for the future. We need to keep working to do better with water. We all have the same goal to protect resources and we are closer than we realize. However, we need to work together and not just be in our own corners. The "why" is what brings us together. To those that work on water, thank you.

Agricultural Technical Assistance in the United States

Jacob Northius, Pheasants Forever

Jacob's role is boots on the ground to support the mission, partner with agencies, and working with the Farm Programs. His focus is range ground and sage grouse initiative work through EQIP. Habitat specialists maintain Pheasants Forever properties and personnel are not in every state, but there is a general nationwide distribution. Pheasants Forever can assist with enhancements to private and public lands, including ag land and range land. They can help producers navigate USDA programs and assist with grant writing.

Lance Ellis, University of Idaho Extension

Lance has been Fremont County Extension Educator for 10 1/2 years. The mission of extension is to take research-based information to the public without any agenda. Knowledge is power and extension educators are here to share knowledge. Land-grant institutions were started by Abraham Lincoln. The 1914 Smith-Lever Act established the extension service. Lance's role is general ag, horticulture, and 4-H. Extension educators are the link between PhD-level specialists (few in number) and the general public. Educators facilitate 2-way communication, taking research to the public, and needs/problems to the specialists. Specialists focus on data and research.

The master gardener program is focused on home owners and commercial landscape enterprises, including plot trials statewide. Topics addressed by extension include, Ag, home horticulture, natural resources, health and nutrition, food safety, financial management, and youth and community development. The Ashton cereal tour of plot trials is a local activity hosted annually. 4H is typically thought of in terms of fat stock. Fremont County typically has 300-400 kids 8 to 18 in 4H, with only either 27 or 37 steers in the fair last year. All the rest are engaged in other activities. The goal of extension is to respond to community needs. Funding has reduced capacity. Fremont & Madison used to have 9 educators, now only 3. Similar reduction in specialists.

If your local educator's expertise doesn't match the need, still contact the local educator first. He/she can refer you to a specialist. Extension does not want to compete with private enterprise.

Bryan Miller, Valley Wide Cooperative

Bryan's main focus is precision agriculture, provided by Valley Wide, a farmer-owned cooperative. Precision ag is more than a buzzword. Science requires measurement and measurement needs to be exact and accurate. Farmers are stewards who produce food and care for the land, including plants, soil and water. The challenge to be addressed is safe and sustainable crop production. To Bryan this means responsible use of inputs. Responsibility includes trained, certified and licensed practitioners. One example is the state Professional Applicator License (PAL). Another is the regional and international Certified Crop Advisor (CCA) credential.

Public health is the number 1 concern. Food safety, including water, is a constant concern. Population growth is the most significant challenge. Many technical advances have originated with agriculture - genetics, chemistry, electronics. One size does not fit all -- geography, soil types, landscapes. Even with an environmental focus, economics is a factor. Specialization and adaptability should always be considered. Technological options to address these factors include, mapping, soil sampling, variable-rate application of seed, fertilizer, water, in-season crop imagery, tissue testing, and precision soil moisture monitoring. All these can be applied on a composite, grid or zone spatial basis. These services are supplied by Valley Agronomics, which is a joint effort of Valley-Wide Coop and Winfield United, itself connected to the CENEX/Land-o-Lakes coop in the Midwest.

Investing in the future is the definition of sustainability. What is it you want? And what are you willing to do to achieve it?

Crafting the Farm Bill, Experiences from Washington D.C. to the West

Laura Ziemer, Trout Unlimited

Drought is a major issue for the western US that can have significant impacts on agriculture as well as fisheries. To help plan and manage for current and future droughts, the Western Ag and Conservation Coalition was created to promote drought resistance practices. This group of organizations has worked to incorporate new tools and expand capacity in the 2018 Farm Bill that help promote drought resistant practices by; 1) addressing western irrigation infrastructure needs, 2) restoring and improving natural water storage, and 3) promoting preparedness and response activities. The tools included and/or modified in the 2018 Farm Bill are EQIP 2304(e), PL-566, RCPP, and CRP.

EQIP irrigation district eligibility to address aging infrastructure and improve reliability of irrigation water delivery, plus create opportunity to improve river or stream flows and enhance watershed health. Including “water management, precision agriculture, resource-conserving crop rotations, irrigation systems, or other practices.”

Higher cost share for priority practices. States may identify ten high-priority conservation practices, including “practices that advance drought mitigation or declining aquifers” to be eligible for higher cost-share payments.

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). Authorizes drought and water conservation agreements, including payment for “significant long-term reduction of consumptive water use”.

Farm Bill – has it been used locally?

Cleve Bagley

Trying new things is key to learning. When assessing soil health, it's crucial to touch the soil, pick it up and look at it to get a sense of what is going on. Cleve put a LESA package on one of his sprinklers. He toured a LESA package on a field where they found water 6-8 feet down in the soil when typically, they'd only find water 18" down with a traditional sprinkler. There is very little drift with LESA packages when the wind blows, unlike traditional sprinklers.

NRCS has a lot of different programs. It is important to look at the big picture, the whole story, when making decisions. Cleve wishes he had started at these types of the things 30 years ago. He is already seeing improvements to soil health.

Shawn Maupin

Shawn is President of the North Fremont Canal Company and explains that the project underway to replace the canal with pipeline had been considered at least twice before, once in the 50s/60s and once in the mid-80s. The project should provide water savings and power savings. The canal was losing about 50% of its water in certain reaches. The delivery system was designed in the 1890s. Also, because of a nearly 400 ft elevation fall, the canal would only need a pump in two places. The project has five phases beginning in 2007 and hoping to finish the last phase starting next spring. It has been roughly 15 years from the initial discussions to today.

NRCS EQIP provided financial and technical support (engineering). NRCS provided everything they needed to put the project out to bid.

Water savings are hard to quantify because now that they're being more efficient, they're also using more water. It is also safer now that there is no open canal. They no longer have to burn ditches, can take power lines out, and will see less weeds on the banks. They did experience a change in NRCS funding process during the project and had to adjust. There are also always hidden costs. For example, if you go through someone's pasture, who pays to replant the alfalfa.

How will the new Farm Bill roll out in Idaho? What is the vision of NRCS for conservation in Idaho?

Bruce Sandoval, NRCS

The NRCS Chief's priorities include implementing and delivering the 2018 Farm Bill to farmers, ranchers and private foresters, streamlining processes and program delivery, better understanding customer needs, and working with customers to improve soil health. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is the "workhorse" program for NRCS in the state of Idaho. One of the changes to EQIP is advance payments for historically underserved producers. Another is that it now allows contracts with Irrigation Districts and Canal Companies. In the past, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) was a subset of EQIP, but now is a separate, stand-alone program.

Locally led workgroups were reorganized due to limited staffing, so the state is split into 17 “teams”, each with its own workgroup.

The challenges the NRCS faces isn't so much funding related as staffing and capacity. They are very interested in partnerships to help build capacity.

Farms and Fish Initiative

Amy Verbeten, Friends of the Teton River

The Farms and Fish Initiative began in Teton Valley and has now expanded to the entire Upper Snake. It was put together by a group of producers, water users, conservations groups and government agencies. In Teton Valley, the goal is to keep working lands working. Financial, technical, and educational assistance is provided to producers to put these projects on the ground.

To help make this happen, they applied for an RCPP grant in 2016 and received funds for 2017-2022 in the amount of \$765,000. About \$60,000 funds a staff person on the ground, but the rest goes straight to producers. Some of the outcomes include improved soil health and water quality, protecting farmland that is threatened by residential development, protecting and restoring upland and riparian habitat, and improving agricultural water reliability and late season streamflows.

Brad Johnson, The Nature Conservancy

Brad is the agriculture strategy manager with The Nature Conservancy and was hired in May. The goal of his position is promoting and teaching sustainable agriculture, conservation through agriculture, soil health, and regenerative agriculture. He aims to help farmers through the process of trying new things. TNC provides a risk mitigation strategy.

Breakout Session – How do we provide service to Idaho farmers and ranchers?

What topics stood out to you during today's conference?

- Interest in watershed programs, sponsors and eligibility for irrigation entities.
- Farm Bill benefits and portions explanation was helpful.
- It was great to hear about the pipeline project in Ashton and NRCS' role.

What would you like to learn more about/what efforts would you like to see put in place?

- Good funding at NRCS.
- Aquifer recharge.
- Increased contracts with local workgroup. Promotion of range practices.
- Cross promotion.
- More information on how NGOs can help.
- Need “navigators” to help producers and other entities more easily access the appropriate programs.

- More information on Teton Valley Farms and Fish effort, how they put partnerships together and where did the in-kind come from?
- How will HFWC use this info? Local workgroups?
- Farmer-to-farmer education.
- Help keep farmers on the farm, slow down sprawl.
- Local workgroups should work with Henry's Fork Watershed Council.
- Focus group with participating farmers.

What barriers exist to putting projects into practice?

- Make opportunities known to producers. Need better marketing.
- Participation – how to spread the word (i.e., paper invitation). Needs to be local folks, local producer panel.
- Not having final ins and outs of Farm Bill.
- On the ground capacity.

Community Building and Wrap-Up

Brandon Hoffner, HFF, asked for another moment of silence to reflect on the day and prepare any final announcements or reflections to share.

Aaron Dalling, FMID shared that this was the Henry's Fork Watershed Council's Annual Conference, but there are also almost monthly meetings to discuss resource issues. We would love to have folks who joined us today to join us for those meetings as well.

Brandon Hoffner asked that if anyone has ideas for the HFWC Annual Tour in August, please share them with us. The group floated the upper Henry's Fork for the tour this year and the topics discussed at that tour will be a part of upcoming meetings over the winter.

Keith Esplin, Eastern Idaho Water Rights Coalition, shared that it is important to keep farms and farmers healthy financially and hopes the group will keep making an effort to share information about the Farm Bill when it comes out.