

GEM STATE **Producer**  Idaho Farm Bureau

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**Idaho Farm Bureau  
PHOTO CONTEST WINNERS**







## Sharing your story from inside your fencerows

**O**ver the years, I have shared how my dad encouraged me to get outside my fencerows to make a difference on my family farm and beyond.

That's been a guiding principle for me as I think about how I can continue to share my farm's story and yours with folks who do not have much—if any—experience with agriculture.

Often, sharing our story and getting outside our fencerows means leaving the farm to meet with people where they are—from the market

down the road to the local chamber of commerce to your state capital all the way to the White House.

Sometimes, getting “outside your fencerows” actually means staying on your farm and inviting the public and policymakers to see firsthand how farmers care for our land and animals.

America's farmers and ranchers have such a great story to share, and it's critical for the public to better understand what goes into

See **DUVALL**, page 6

# The President's Desk

By **Bryan Searle**

President, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation



## Idaho Farm Bureau's annual meeting

**I**n a way, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation's annual meeting is a culmination of a year's worth of work toward strengthening or altering our policy.

In another way, it's a celebration by the Farm Bureau family of another year of farming and ranching. Getting to meet old friends and meet new ones is always a highlight of the meeting.

The 2024 event, which was held in Boise Dec. 3-6, included several presentations by guest speakers and IFBF leaders, as well as

workshops designed to encourage and inform producers.

During this year's meeting, a theme that was heard by attendees many times was an encouragement for them to tell their story to the public that is hungry to hear from real farmers and ranchers.

During this year's annual IFBF conference, guest speaker Jessie Jarvis, an Idaho rancher and farmer, pretty much nailed that message

See **SEARLE**, page 6

# Inside Farm Bureau

By **Zak Miller**

CEO, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation



## Servant Leaders

**I** don't know how most farm and ranch kids learn the way of the world, but I know how I discovered the rules of agriculture and what it means to be a farmer and rancher.

Growing up on a farm and a ranch, I learned by degrees. First, I observed my parents and family at a young age.

I recall watching newborn calves being put in the bathtub on cold days, riding in the pick-up and watching my dad and grandpa irrigate potatoes with a shovel to get the “sub” just right, and watching my mother and grand-

mother put handkerchiefs over their noses while unloading the itchy barley at harvest.

I didn't understand why; it just was what it was.

Later, I served, not always knowing why, but that it must be done. I drove an open-cab tractor to beat potato vines, freezing in the morning and sweating in the afternoon.

Sometimes, I could not feel my fingers or toes and I was not allowed to get off my horse until the cows were home. Early on Saturdays,

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# Idaho Farm Bureau.

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Photo by Sean Ellis

**It cost more, on average, to rent cropland in Idaho last year, according to USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service.**

# The cost to rent cropland in Idaho up in 2024

By Sean Ellis  
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

It cost more, on average, to rent cropland in Idaho in 2024. That's no huge surprise, given the average value of Idaho farm real estate rose 5 percent in 2024 compared with 2023.

According to USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service, the average cost to rent cropland in Idaho rose 5 percent last year, from \$197 an acre in 2023 to \$206 per acre in 2024.

That includes all cropland, irrigated and non-irrigated (dryland).

The average rental rate for irrigated cropland in Idaho last year is estimated at \$276 per acre, up 4 percent, or \$10 an acre, over last year.

The dryland rental rate for Idaho cropland is estimated at \$66 per acre in 2024, down from \$65 an acre in 2023. The average rental rate for pasture in Idaho increased 8 percent, from \$13 to \$14 per acre.

"They are going up," said New Plymouth farmer Galen Lee. "Part of it is just competition for good farm ground because we're losing it all the time. There's more competition for it."

# With fresh U.S. spuds now flowing into Mexico, domestic potato industry sets its sights on Japan

By Sean Ellis

*Idaho Farm Bureau Federation*

POCATELLO – Fresh U.S. potatoes are now flowing into Mexico at a rapid and increasing rate, and that nation has become a very important export market for the domestic spud industry.

The U.S. potato industry would like to see the same thing happen in Japan.

The spud industry in Mexico fought for more than two decades to prevent fresh U.S. potatoes being allowed into that nation beyond a 16-mile area along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The U.S. has long exported frozen potato products to Mexico, but that nation did not allow fresh U.S. potato imports beyond that 16-mile zone. Having fresh U.S. spuds allowed beyond that area was a major goal for the U.S. spud industry for many years.

Every time the U.S. industry appeared to be close to achieving that goal, Mexico's potato industry successfully put up a roadblock.

But in May 2022, U.S. potatoes were allowed to be exported into all of Mexico, following a unanimous decision by the Mexican Supreme Court in favor of U.S. potato growers.

U.S. fresh potato exports to Mexico have quickly gained steam since then, reaching 246,000 metric tons from July 2023 to June 2024, according to Potatoes USA.

That represented a 63 percent increase over the prior 12-month period and amounted to \$136 million in value.

While pushing for total access to the Mexican market for fresh U.S. potatoes, domestic industry leaders said that market

represented about a \$150 million opportunity for U.S. spud growers if completely opened.

Now that it is, that \$150 million number looks realistic and might end up being on the conservative side.

"Everything we said ... five years ago about the value of that market, the potential, is all being realized right now," said National Potato Council CEO Kam Quarles. "It's terrific to have that market open for U.S. potatoes."

Kim Breshears, chief marketing officer for Potatoes USA, was in Mexico recently and visited some grocery stores there.

"There were a lot of Idaho potatoes," she said. "We have a lot of opportunity to increase potato exports down there."

Idaho Potato Commission President and CEO Jamey Higham said up to 20-25 loads of Idaho potatoes per day are being shipped to Mexico.

"This has become a huge export market for us," he said. "It's a great market and I think ... there is still room for growth."

Idaho leads the nation in total potato production. Spuds are the state's top crop in terms of total revenue and it's the product that Idaho is most famous for.

Idaho farmers produce about 14 billion pounds of potatoes every year, which is about a third of the nation's total spud supply.

One of every five rows of spuds grown in the U.S. are exported, so foreign markets are an important avenue to the domestic and Idaho industry.

Japan, which does not allow fresh potato imports, is a major focus for the U.S. spud



industry and the challenge there for the U.S. potato industry is similar to the challenge Mexico posed.

Japan is a major destination for processed potatoes from the United States, but it does not allow fresh potato imports.

"It's potentially a great market for Idaho and U.S. potatoes," Higham said.

As Mexico did for many years, Japan has also thrown up one roadblock after another to prevent fresh potato imports, Quarles said.

He said that if the United States is allowed to export fresh potatoes into Japan, it would result in about a 10 percent increase in fresh U.S. potato exports.





Photo illustration by Joel Benson

**The U.S. potato industry continues to push Japan to allow imports of fresh U.S. potatoes. If that happens, it would result in an additional \$150 million per year in exports.**

On April 11, a bipartisan group of 10 U.S. senators, including both of Idaho's senators, sent a letter to the president urging him to continue to push Japan to allow access to fresh U.S. potatoes.

According to the letter, fresh potato access to Japan was first requested almost three decades ago.

Despite the efforts of USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Farming and Fisheries (MAFF) "continues to delay substantive technical discussions on table stock access," the letter states.

"This marks the fifth year of discussions without any forward progress by MAFF to resolve this decades-long issue," it adds.

The bipartisan letter states that there is "no valid phytosanitary justification for these delays, as the U.S. potato industry has a strong history of exporting fresh potatoes to many markets, including South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand. These exports occur safely and routinely throughout the year, providing benefits both for consumers in the

Indo-Pacific and our growers here in the United States."

During the week of Sept. 16, there was another bilateral meeting between APHIS and MAFF, in Idaho Falls.

Quarles said the domestic industry will continue to press for full access for fresh U.S. potatoes into Japan.

"Japan is a huge potential for us," he said. "It's well worth the effort that ... everybody is putting into this trying to get that market open." ■

# DUVALL

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*Continued from page 2*

growing the food, fiber and renewable fuel that drives our nation.

Our research shows that the public trusts farmers, but we should never take that trust for granted. We need to be actively building on that trust by reaching out and inviting folks to see what modern agriculture looks like.

And that kind of engagement yields even greater trust. Our research shows that trust increases by 20% for adults who have some level of personal experience with a farmer or rancher.

What's more, those who have had an opportunity to engage with or meet a farmer, are much more likely to have a positive perception about farming, including how farmers care for their animals and the environment.

What does it look like to bring the public inside your fence-rows?

Perhaps you can host a school group or another community focused event on your farm, like a farm-to-table dinner.

You can also extend a personal invitation to local leaders to visit your farm to help them see how vital agriculture is to our communities and our country.

I also believe it's important for me to practice what I preach. So recently, I had the pleasure of hosting the acting director of EPA's Office of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Ms. Venus Welch White, on my family farm.

She stopped by on a trip through the area to see firsthand how we have restored the land on my family's farm.

While it would have been much easier to schedule a chat in Washington, the impact would not have been the same.

Rather than just telling Ms. White how we have restored our

farmland since I was a boy, I was able to show her the green pastures on my farm and the healthy cattle grazing there.

She saw the results of three generations of work to turn unproductive land into rolling hills that now support livestock while reducing erosion.

We were also able to hop in a truck and visit my neighbor down the road for her to see a dairy farm and the sustainable practices in place there. And more importantly, now she has farms and faces to think of when she is working on policy and regulations in Washington.

Farm visits like this also build stronger working relationships with government officials, while providing them with the real-world examples they need to consider when weighing policy decisions.

As we head into a new year, with a new Congress and a new administration, it's important for us to engage.

Let's invite more leaders, lawmakers, and government officials out to our farms and ranches to get their boots dirty.

It's critical for folks in Washington, and in your state and local governments, to get to see firsthand how the rules, regulations, and programs they are working on impact farms like mine and yours.

There's just no substitute for getting outside the office and onto a farm or ranch to see firsthand how farmers care for our land and animals.

I'd like to amend my dad's advice to me.

Yes, let's keep on getting outside our fencerows, but let's also find ways to bring others in to see all the hard work and care that goes on inside our fencerows to keep our food supply safe, sustainable and secure. ■

# SEARLE

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*Continued from page 2*

in a handful of words: "Who is the (public relations) firm for agriculture?" she asked. "It is me and you."

She encouraged farmers and ranchers to tell their story even if they must get out of their comfort zone.

Remember, if we're not telling the story of agriculture, somebody else will be and what they are saying may be false.

There is so much that goes on during IFBF's annual meeting, it would be difficult to capture all of it in a single column.

Suffice it to say it's a major event attended by several hundred Idaho Farm Bureau members and their families meant to help

get the organization's members on the same page.

It's also attended by members of other Idaho ag groups and commissions, as well as by elected officials and representatives of federal and state agencies that deal with agriculture.

Those people are always welcome at this event.

New this year, the meeting was held in conjunction with a joint conference that included members of IFBF's Young Farmers and Ranchers (YF&R) and Promotion and Education (P&E) programs.

This was done to provide an opportunity for the members of these two programs to learn from each other and explore poten-

tial new opportunities. The P&E program is open to anyone, including YF&R members, interested in helping to promote agriculture.

That conference was purposely flowed into IFBF's main meeting as a way for these members to experience opportunities within Farm Bureau they might not otherwise get to see. This also allows YF&R members to mingle with and learn from as well as have influence on the more experienced members of the organization.

Of course, the heart of all IFBF annual meetings is the House of Delegates session, where voting delegates from all the various county Farm Bureau organizations in the

state get together to vote on proposed changes to our policy book.

This book is the organization's marching orders throughout the year.

All of the delegates are real farmers and ranchers, who vote on issues that directly affect their industry. They debate on a host of issues, from wolves to water to weeds and wildlife.

As I said at the beginning of this column, this is a culmination of a year's worth of work developing various policy proposals. A harvest, if you will.

In another way, it's just a beginning.

Now comes the real work: trying to get some of these policies adopted into law. That means talking to legislators about them and informing them about why a particular policy is important to agriculture.

You might even be called on to testify on a certain bill before legislators.

Be prepared to tell them your story and how it would affect your particular operation.

Your real-life experiences are the most impactful when shared personally from you. Remember, those elected are elected by the people and for the people.

Elected officials must be held accountable to those who elected them and your conversations you have with them build a relationship to make this happen.

Remember, a policy that started as an idea at the grassroots county Farm Bureau level can become law, as was explained during the 2024 meeting by Wilder farmer and IFBF member Miguel Villafana.

He walked people through the process of how a Farm Bureau policy can become

law, using Agriculture Protection Areas as an example.

This farmland preservation bill, which was adopted into law by the Idaho Legislature in 2024, is a voluntary land-use designation that is requested by a landowner of their county commissioners.

The landowner receives certain non-monetary benefits or incentives that helps to protect the viability of the operation.

This APA idea began at the grassroots county Farm Bureau level and blossomed into state law.

This shows the power of the Farm Bureau family when it works together for the betterment of all of agriculture.

Never forget that you have this type of power, and also don't forget to tell your story. ■

## MILLER

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*Continued from page 2*

I did farm chores while friends watched Saturday morning cartoons.

I didn't understand why the farm and ranch had to choose the time and place for all the work.

- Why couldn't the cows wait to be fed for a week while we went to Disneyland?
- Why couldn't we wait for a nice day to work cows?
- Why couldn't I sleep on Saturday and do the work another day?

Somewhere in my youth, a light went on; it wasn't a quick or bright light, but it went on.

Slowly, I learned why we had to work as servants in the wet and cold and heat, why pipe and cows needed to be moved early in the morning, why straw must be spread during calving season, and why if a pivot went down on Sunday, the crops couldn't wait until Monday for it to be fixed.

Slowly, I began to understand that being a farmer and rancher means serving but also leading, especially when the jobs and weather were the worst.

Farmers and ranchers deserve many titles of distinction and honor, and Servant Leader is one of them.

Due to agriculture's unique and challenging nature, it can be difficult for our farmers and ranchers when others are unable or unwilling to sacrifice as they do.

Closed signs at 5 p.m. during harvest are problematic for farmers to comprehend.

However, there are those who have the same commitment and

grit as our revered farmers and ranchers. We call them by so many names, but it is not the title that shows who they are.

Just like a farmer and rancher, they get the need to serve and are driven and committed enough to the cause to be leaders at the same time.

Regardless of their profession or title, we revere and appreciate these people.

These are the ones who don't stay home while their team lives on the river trying to protect Idaho from invasive quagga mussels; they will not back down in defending Idaho's dairy farms when a threat is seen.

These people refuse to be bullied or cajoled by governments, peers, or threats when they feel they are working for their stakeholders. These people remind us just how blessed we are in Idaho to be surrounded by Servant Leaders.

In 2024, our very own Servant Leader, Chanel Tewalt, director of the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, showed us all what a true Servant Leader is as she navigated through the threats of quagga mussels, avian flu, and many other threats to our Idaho farmers and ranchers.

She is a faithful servant, listening to the needs of agriculture and then leading out to defend, protect, and help Idaho agriculture.

During Idaho Farm Bureau Federation's annual conference, held the first week of December, Tewalt was awarded IFBF's Defender of Agriculture Award, the organization's highest award for an Idaho official.

She is truly deserving of this award and that she happens to come from farm stock herself makes presenting her this award all the sweeter.

Idaho is blessed to have such a strong leader who represents, promotes, and defends Idaho agriculture. ■



Idaho Farm Bureau Federation photos

Idaho farmer and social media influencer Jessie Jarvis was one of several presenters during Idaho Farm Bureau Federation's 85th annual meeting that urged farmers and ranchers to tell their story.

# Farmers urged to tell their story

By Sean Ellis  
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

BOISE – During Idaho Farm Bureau Federation's 85th annual meeting, farmers and ranchers were urged to tell their story.

They were also applauded for helping to produce, along with other U.S. farmers and ranchers, the most abundant, safest and affordable food supply in the world.

Keynote speaker Rick Rigsby noted that by the year 2054, there will be an estimated 9.8 billion people in the world "that the people in here have ... the responsibility to feed."

Rigsby, an ordained minister, motivational speaker and author, reminded farmers and ranchers that what they do is extremely important and he likened it to a calling.

"What you folks are doing is a calling," Rigsby said. "As a pastor, I can tell you, you don't walk away from a calling."

He urged agricultural producers to "be the kind of farmer that your grandparents would be proud of"

IFBF is the state's largest general farm organization and represents



*“Agriculture is the wisest and purest pursuit and we have to continue to... share that message.”*

– Jessie Jarvis, Idaho rancher

more than 10,000 farmers and ranchers in Idaho.

This year’s annual IFBF meeting was held Dec. 3-6 in Boise and attended by several hundred Farm Bureau members and their families from throughout the state.

A constant theme of this year’s annual convention was the call for farmers and ranchers to tell their story.

“You have to be willing to advocate for agriculture,” said Idaho Farm Bureau Federation President Bryan Searle. “If you don’t tell the story, somebody else will. If somebody else tells that story, it might be false.”

“You have stories to tell; don’t be afraid to tell them,” said Joel Benson, director of IFBF’s information division.

Jessie Jarvis, a guest speaker and third-generation Idaho rancher and farmer, told Farm Bureau members that telling the story of agriculture from their perspective builds trust among the public, makes agriculture relatable and tangible, and combats misinformation.

“Who is the PR firm for agriculture?” she asked. “It is me and you.”

Jarvis encouraged farmers to get outside of their comfort zone if necessary to tell their story.

“I’m wildly uncomfortable (right now), but I’m doing it anyway,” she said. “Agriculture is the wisest and purest pursuit and we have to continue to ... share that message.”

She shared the results of a recent national Gallup poll that showed Americans overwhelmingly feel more favorable about agriculture than they any other industry.

Still, there is a lot of work still to do to



**House of Delegates participants decide on proposed policies during Idaho Farm Bureau Federation’s 85th annual meeting, which took place Dec. 3-6 in Boise.**

educate consumers about the industry, Jarvis added, pointing out that 54 percent of Americans aged 11-24 have never seen a cow in real life.

“That’s mind-blowing,” she said.

During the conference, Jarvis was presented IFBF’s first-ever Social Media Influencer Award for her efforts in spreading the word about agriculture through social media and other avenues.

The award is given to “those who go above and beyond to not only support agriculture, but to share agriculture,” Benson said.

Jarvis and Searle were two of several presenters that spoke about how important it is for farmers to tell their own unique story, and not let someone else tell it for them.

“I am a big proponent of advocating for agriculture,” University of Idaho meat scientist Phil Bass said in a podcast recorded live during the convention.

“Be willing to talk to people,” he said. “You would be surprised at how interested people are in what we do.”

Idaho State Department of Agriculture Director Chanel Tewalt was awarded IFBF’s Defender of Agriculture Award, the organization’s highest award for an Idaho official.

“This is a woman who is one of us,” Searle said when presenting that award. “She understands agriculture ... Director Tewalt is (a) defender of agriculture.”

“Ag has been foundational in every aspect of my life,” Tewalt said.

She said the relationship she has with Farm Bureau pre-dates her role as ISDA director and “is one of the most important things I have in this job.”

During the convention, Searle announced that he will retire from the IFBF president’s position next December when his current term expires. A potato farmer from Shelley, Searle has served as the organization’s president for nine years.

He said he and his wife, Mary, made the decision that this will be his last term as IFBF president, and he made it clear that he will continue to work hard to build the Farm Bureau organization until he retires as president.

“I turn 65 in a year; I think it’s a good time to hand the reins over,” Searle said.

The IFBF annual meeting was also attended by some elected officials, as well as representatives from state and federal agencies involved with agriculture, and those involved with the state’s farm commissions and other ag groups.

“We appreciate our elected officials and



**LEFT: Idaho State Department of Agriculture Director Chanel Tewalt is presented Idaho Farm Bureau Federation's Defender of Agriculture award by IFBF President Bryan Searle, left, and Russ Hendricks, vice president of government affairs. RIGHT: Jason Fellows, a member of Idaho Farm Bureau Federation's board of directors, speaks to Farm Bureau members during IFBF's 85th annual meeting.**



others that work with our organization being here today,” Searle said during the convention.

During the conference, Searle also urged Farm Bureau members to get and remain engaged, whether that means telling their story, testifying on bills involving agriculture, helping host events or building a relationship with their elected officials.

“You can make a difference,” he said. “Go forth. Get engaged, stay engaged. You can make a difference ... if you are willing to stand up and engage, advocate and teach.”

*“People that love agriculture love to share it and talk about it. Our vision in this program is that all will appreciate and support Idaho agriculture.”*

– Tess Zollinger, P&E committee co-chair

Farm Bureau members’ engagement is already making a difference “in this state and across the nation,” Searle said, “and we can’t ... let off the gas. Don’t take a breath. Forge ahead. We have to stay unified and engaged.”

As a way to encourage farmers to be engaged, IFBF board member Jason Fellows quoted Abraham Lincoln: “If you want to predict the future, change it.”

For the first time, the IFBF annual convention included a joint meeting of the organization’s Young Farmers and Ranchers

(YF&R) and Promotion and Education (P&E) programs.

Farm Bureau’s YF&R program includes young producers from the ages of 18 to 35. The P&E program is open to anyone, including YF&R members, interested in helping to promote agriculture.

Farm Bureau leaders said the goal of this joint YF&R and P&E conference was to bring members of the two programs together to learn from each other, as well as create bonds and friendships.

“The things you learn in the YF&R program, you get to use in the P&E program and the things you learn in the P&E program, you get to use in the YF&R program,” Fellows said.

Holding it during the regular annual IFBF conference was also meant to show YF&R and P&E members all the possibilities and opportunities that exist within Farm Bureau.

East Idaho farmer Marquee Ricks serves as an example of those opportunities.

Ricks has been involved with Farm Bureau’s YF&R program for 10 years and four years ago won the IFBF Discussion Meet, an event that simulates a committee meeting rather than a debate and is meant to hone the public speaking and problem-solving skills of young farmers and ranchers.

She went on to win the American Farm Bureau Federation Discussion Meet against state Farm Bureau winners from all over the nation.

During the convention, Fellows asked for examples from the crowd of how Farm Bureau has benefited people. Ricks spoke up.

“I believe Farm Bureau refines people,” she said during the joint YF&R and P&E conference. “We grow people here.”

Lance and Tess Zollinger are co-chairs of the P&E committee and their joint presentation was designed to give Farm Bureau members a little taste of what they can help accomplish through the program.

Lance Zollinger said the program allows any Farm Bureau member to be engaged in support of agriculture and their community.



“What we want is for you to have an idea of how powerful this can be,” he said. “Jump in and give it a go.”

“People that love agriculture love to share it and talk about it.” Tess Zollinger said. “Our vision in this program is that all will appreciate and support Idaho agriculture.”

She reminded people that the P&E program takes men and women of all ages and that “this is something you can do along with YF&R.”

During the general conference, IFBF CEO Zak Miller reminded members that “this is a grassroots organization. You are the grassroots. Everything we will accomplish ... will come from the grassroots.”

He and Searle applauded the many volunteers who guide the organization, from the county level up through the state level.

The main purpose of IFBF’s annual meeting is to pass policy that supports the state’s agricultural industry. Voting delegates from all of Idaho’s county Farm Bureau organizations vote on proposed policies during the convention’s House of Delegates session.

The delegates, who are all farmers or ranchers, discuss, debate and vote on a wide array of proposed policies.

The policies are introduced by grassroots members at the county Farm Bureau level, discussed and vetted there, and then discussed, debated and voted on during the House of Delegates session.

Policies that are adopted by majority vote during the House of Delegates are included in IFBF’s policy book, which contains the organization’s marching orders throughout the year.

During this House of Delegates session, members voted to add a policy that supports “state-funded research to improve and better understand the state aquifers.”

During the conference, Todd Argall, CEO of Farm Bureau Mutual Insurance Co. of Idaho, said that membership within the organization has reached an all-time high of 90,035.

He said the insurance company is in good shape financially but made it clear that it will not rest on its laurels.

“We’re not settling for anything,” he said. “We have work to do.”

In explaining how a grassroots idea by



**ABOVE: Idaho Farm Bureau Federation President Bryan Searle speaks to Farm Bureau members from around the state during IFBF’s 85th annual meeting, which was held in Boise Dec. 3-6.**

**RIGHT: Todd Argall, CEO of Farm Bureau Mutual Insurance Co. of Idaho, speaks to Farm Bureau members during IFBF’s 85th annual meeting.**



a Farm Bureau member can end up in the IFBF policy book and eventually become a law, Wilder farmer Miguel Villafana also provided more clarity on Agriculture Protection Areas.

This farmland preservation bill began as a resolution at the county Farm Bureau level and was adopted into law by the Idaho Legislature in 2024.

An APA is a voluntary land-use designation that is requested by a landowner of their county commissioners. The landowner receives certain non-monetary benefits or incentives that help protect the viability of the operation.

Villafana said the respect of private property rights something that everyone involved in creating the proposal agreed on.

“That’s a foundational (idea) in Farm Bureau and something everybody agreed on,” he said.

Everybody also agreed APAs should

be voluntary and include some type of incentive.

For now, the APA statute does not include a financial incentive, but adding one is something that is being actively researched and looked at, Villafana said.

The purpose of his presentation was to show how an idea at the grassroots level can make a difference.

“If there are things you feel strongly about, bring them up ... They can become law,” he said. ■





Idaho Farm Bureau Federation photos

Bingham County farmers Ralph and Joyce Dalley, right, of Bingham County are presented the Idaho Farm Bureau Federation President's Cup Award by IFBF President Bryan Searle during IFBF's 85th annual meeting.

## Farm Bureau awards several members

By Sean Ellis

*Idaho Farm Bureau Federation*

BOISE – Bingham County farmers Ralph and Joyce Dalley were presented Idaho Farm Bureau Federation's most prestigious award Dec. 5.

The President's Cup Award is the organization's highest honor and goes to a person or individuals who have committed themselves to Farm Bureau and agriculture.

"As I think of these two individuals, a couple of words come to mind: unselfish servants," IFBF President Bryan Searle said when presenting the award during the organization's 85th annual meeting. "They serve, serve, serve, serve."

Ralph and Joyce Dalley previously participated in IFBF's Ag Ambassadors program, which is designed to train and engage Farm Bureau members to be leaders and to advocate for agriculture.

"That lit a fire," Searle said, and they went on to serve on the Bingham County Farm Bureau board and Ralph also served as the BCFB president.

"It was just constant service and concern about individuals," Searle said.

The Dalleys attended the annual meeting with their children, some of whom have also served Farm Bureau in various capacities. That includes Chris Dalley, who previously served on the IFBF board of directors.

*"As I think of these two individuals, a couple of words come to mind: unselfish servants. They serve, serve, serve, serve."*

*– Bryan Searle, IFBF president*

“We honor and tribute you as an entire family,” Searle said.

“We have loved and appreciated the Farm Bureau,” Joyce Dalley said while the family was being presented the award in front of several hundred fellow IFBF members. “Thank you, Farm Bureau. This award is very humbling ... We love Farm Bureau. We love you.”

“Farm Bureau is the way we can make a difference,” Ralph Dalley said.

Miguel and Camas Villafana, who farm in Wilder, were presented with IFBF’s Achievement Award, which recognizes young farmers or ranchers who have excelled in their farming or ranching operation and honed their leadership abilities.

Achievement award contestants are evaluated on a combination of their farming operation’s growth and financial progress and their leadership both within Farm Bureau and outside of the organization.

Contestants give a presentation to a panel of judges, who ask them questions.

The Villafanas won an all-expenses-paid trip to the Executive Program for Agricultural Producers, sponsored by AgWest. TEPAP is an extensive business course in Texas that is meant to help individual ag producers improve their farm or ranch business.

Rigby rancher Paige Nelson received IFBF’s Excellence in Agriculture Award, which spotlights young Farm Bureau members who are agricultural enthusiasts but have not earned a majority of their income from an owned production agriculture enterprise in the past three years.

Competitors for the Excellence award are judged based on their understanding of ag issues as well as their leadership experiences and achievements.

Nelson won a 2024 Polaris side by side, sponsored by the Idaho Farm Bureau Federation.

The Achiever and Excellence awards are both part of IFBF’s Young Farmers and Ranchers program, which is open to Farm Bureau members between the ages of 18 and 35.

Denton Perkins won IFBF’s annual Discussion Meet, which helps young producers hone their public speaking and problem-solving skills during a



**TOP: Miguel and Camas Villafana, second and third from right, won the Idaho Farm Bureau Federation Achievement Award during IFBF’s 85th annual meeting. ABOVE: Rigby rancher Paige Nelson won IFBF’s Excellence in Agriculture Award.**

competition that is meant to simulate a committee meeting rather than a debate.

The contestants, who moderate themselves and engage each other in a cooperative manner, discuss a pre-selected topic and are judged based on constructive criticism, cooperation and communication.

Perkins won a 2024 Polaris side by side, sponsored by Valley Wide Cooperative.

The winners of the Achiever and Excellence awards and the Discussion Meet will compete during the American Farm

Bureau Federation annual conference in San Antonio in January.

A special Collegiate Discussion Meet, which featured students from University of Idaho, College of Southern Idaho and BYU-Idaho, was won by Eliza Dugan of CSI.

She won \$2,500, sponsored by Cache Valley Bank.

In both Discussion Meets, dozens of people participated at the district and state level. ■



# **IDAHO FARM BUREAU FEDERATION PROMOTION AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE 2024 PHOTO CONTEST WINNERS**



Farm Kids Winner: Mitchell Searle



Farming Winner: Kirklan Oler



Livestock Winner: Mitchell Searle





**Generations Winner: Jim Parker**



**Scenic Idaho & Best in Show Winner:  
Pamela Payne**



**People's Choice: Britney Chandler**

# Regional AEWRs to rise 4.5 percent, on average

By **Samantha Ayoub**  
*AFBF Economist*

Farmers who use the H-2A program were focused on US-DA-National Agricultural Statistics Service's Farm Labor report, released on Nov. 20, as it offers a glimpse into their future operational expenses.

Each year, the Department of Labor (DOL) uses the "field and livestock workers' combined" wage rate reported in the November Farm Labor report (based on the Farm Labor Survey or FLS) to establish most H-2A workers' minimum wage, known as the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR).

This year, the combined field and livestock worker wage rate nationally is \$18.12, up 3.2% from the 2023 release. Regional wages increased an average of 4.5%, but this reflects wide ranges of change across the country.

The new wages become official when DOL publishes them in the Federal Register in December. This wage increase isn't the only hurdle H-2A users will have to clear in 2025.

## What to expect in 2025

The FLS collects data twice a year – every month in California – through voluntary farm surveys in every state except Alaska. These surveys collect employment and wage data for one week each quarter – in January, April, July and October.

The November FLS reports the annual average combined field and livestock wage for 15 regions and three states – California, Florida and Hawaii.

The combined field and livestock wage in the FLS includes six Standard Occupation Classifications (SOCs) – graders and sorters; agricultural equipment operators; farmworkers: crop, nursery, and greenhouse; farmworkers: farm, ranch, and aquacultural animals; packers and packagers; and agricultural workers, all others.

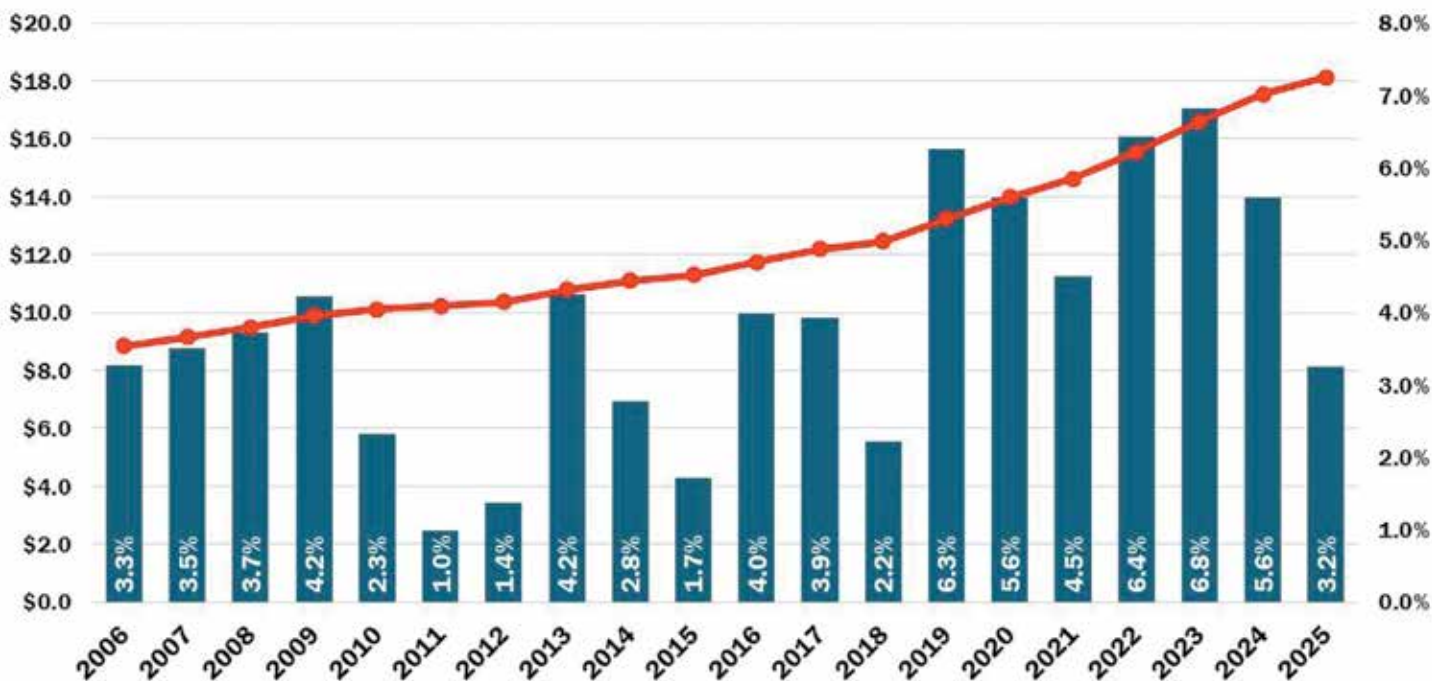
Over 96% of H-2A workers fall into these SOCs. The remaining employment contracts that include any job requirements outside of these SOCs, including five of the top 10 fiscal year 2024 H-2A occupations, and any Alaskan employers will update their AEWR when the respective state's May 2024 Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics is released in early April 2025.

The national average combined field and livestock worker wage released in this report had the lowest growth rate since 2018, but no employers pay the national wage, as they pay the regional wage for their state.

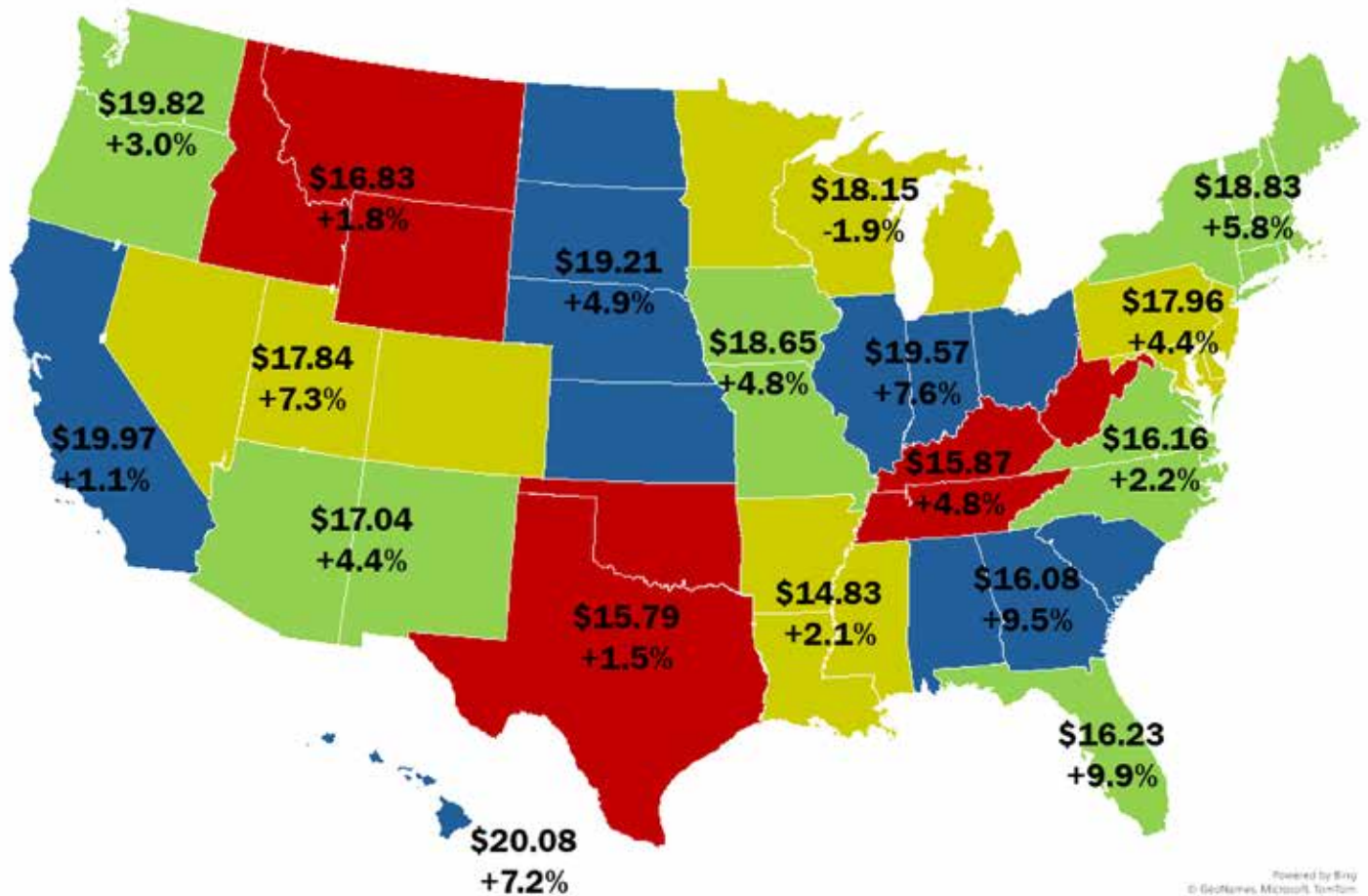
On average, AEWRs will rise 4.5% from 2024, but where an employer is located will have big impacts on their wage change. Regional wages vary substantially, ranging from \$14.83 in the Delta region – Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas – to \$20.08 in Hawaii.

Eleven of the 15 regions will see an increase in wages larger than the national growth rate. The Southeast – South Carolina,

## National Average AEWR and Year-over-Year Change, 2006-2025



# 2025 Adverse Effect Wage Rate



**AFB** American Farm Bureau Federation

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Source: USDA NASS

Georgia and Alabama – and Florida can expect a 10% increase in 2025, over \$1.40 more per hour.

In comparison, nonfarm wages rose only 4% from October 2023 to 2024. Florida began raising its state minimum wage \$1 per hour each year in 2020 until it reaches \$15 per hour in 2026 which may be contributing to spikes in farm wages.

California’s wage increased only 1% this year, a relief after averaging an increase of 7.3% each year for the last five years. After five years with the highest AEW, California will fall to second with an hourly wage of \$19.97, following only Hawaii, where farmers will be required to pay \$20.08 per hour, up 7.2% from 2024.

However, California is the third-largest employer of H-2A workers with 37,511 certified positions in fiscal year 2024, while Hawaii had only 251 positions certified in the same year.

Interestingly, the Lakes region – Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota – had a decrease in the combined field and livestock wage rate in 2024. It is possible that declining response rates in the Lakes region have affected the data collection.

Michigan has also seen decreases in the number of H-2A employers in their state in fiscal year 2024. This may indicate that higher paying employers, including those utilizing H-2A, are exiting the program in response to rising production expenses, including labor.

It is also possible that shrinking net farm incomes have reduced the ability of farmers to offer incentive pay, such as a piece rate. Since the FLS collects gross wages that include bonus compensation, a decrease in incentive pay would lead to an overall wage decrease.

While the FLS results are typically copied and pasted into the new AEW announcement, DOL has the authority to establish other wages. So, H-2A employers in the Lake region will have to wait see if their minimum wage rates will follow the survey down.

### Implementation inconsistencies

The timeline to implement the new 2025 AEW will vary depending on where the employer is located. DOL finalized a new Farmworker Protection Rule in April 2024 that, in addition to many other provisions, removed the traditional 14-day imple-



mentation period for employers to begin paying the new AEW. R.

Seventeen states – Georgia, Kansas, South Carolina, Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia – sued DOL over the rulemaking, and as of Aug. 26, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Georgia granted a temporary halt of the rule in the filing states.

Rather than pausing implementation of the rules across the country, DOL now has different requirements for employers in just those 17 states. While 48% of H-2A workers are employed in the states who filed for an injunction, for most states, this is the first year that employers will be required to immediately begin paying the new AEW upon certification in December.

Navigating the divided DOL guidelines and having to immediately alter business operations to accommodate new wages has added to the administrative burdens of employing H-2A workers.

## Conclusion

Fruit and vegetable farmers, the largest users of H-2A, spend 38% of their farm expenses on labor, and that share will continue to grow if wages grow as they have in recent years.

Rising farmworker wages are a considerable challenge to American specialty crop producers competing with farmers in other countries who can hire at a fraction of the cost.

DOL's methodology of directly using the average wage rates from the FLS as the minimum H2A wage has raised concerns among users of the program, especially since it does not account for the substantial additional costs of transportation and housing, as well as the direct and indirect administrative costs of using the program.

Nevertheless, H-2A workers have become vital to American food production as the domestic workforce continues to move away from agricultural labor. ■

# New sales tax exemption for grain bins used in agricultural production

## By Idaho State Tax Commission

The Idaho State Tax Commission is informing farmers that Idaho no longer charges sales and use tax on grain bins used directly and primarily in agricultural production.

Idaho has historically charged sales or use tax on agricultural grain bins because they're real property. However, as of Jan. 1, 2024, the law now specifically exempts agricultural grain bin structures and their component parts from sales and use tax when used in agricultural production.

The new law states that grain bin structures, augers, dryers, fans, sweep augers, and other equipment, when used directly and primarily in agricultural production, are exempt from sales tax.

This means that equipment or materials that become part of an agricultural grain bin structure are no longer subject to sales tax.

The sales tax exemption also applies to any supplies or equipment used in a quality control function to prepare a crop for storage in a grain

bin structure used in agricultural production.

Even hired contractors don't have to pay sales or use tax on those materials or equipment.

The new law is part of the production exemption (Idaho Code sections 63-3622D(a)(6) and 63-3622D(a)(7)) and only addresses the sales tax liability of grain bin structures used in agricultural production.

All other real property improvements used in farming operations are still subject to sales and use tax (except irrigation used in farming production; see Idaho Code section 63-3622W).

Any grain bin structure not directly and primarily used in agricultural production is still subject to sales and use tax.

For more information on sales and use tax:

- Visit [tax.idaho.gov/salesusehub](https://tax.idaho.gov/salesusehub)
- Call the Tax Commission at (208) 334-7660 in the Boise area or toll free at (800) 972-7660



# Idaho's water future is flowing in the right direction

By Lt. Gov. Scott Bedke

To spend one's life in agriculture is to be an optimist.

As a life-long rancher, I try to greet each day with a positive mindset and a firm belief that I can handle whatever the day throws at me. I also firmly believe that there are virtually no problems, no conflicts, no disagreements that are beyond a solution.

Idaho's newly-minted, farmer-crafted water agreement is a case in point. As Governor Little said, "... the goal all along was to avoid the heavy hand of government by bringing farmers to the table ... and keep crops wet this year and into the future."

After a summer full of numerous meetings with many frank and honest discussions, I am pleased that Idaho now has an updated Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA) mitigation plan that has been signed by both our senior surface water and junior groundwater users.

This is a noteworthy accomplishment for many reasons: it puts to bed the decades-long conflict between our water users, it helps preserve and protect our most valuable resource, and it shows that even the thorniest problems can be solved through honest negotiation and relentless effort.

The honest negotiation and relentless effort came from farmers, ranchers, irrigators, and producers who came together under one roof to hash out their major point of contention: water availability.

Gradually they all were able to set aside their own interests and realize that they shared a common goal: to protect our state's agricultural prosperity and ensure a sustainable water supply into the future.

We can no longer act like water is an unlimited resource. We live in the arid West, where water is always going to be in short supply.

It's unfortunate we had to get as far as a potential curtailment to really address our water crisis. But water is a property right and it is the state's responsibility to ensure that property rights are protected.

And while Idaho may be the fastest growing state and one of the top crop and dairy producers in the nation, we only have so much water to go around. The harsh reality of facing a possible curtailment made senior and junior water right holders realize that it was time to work together and find a solution.

Now, Idaho has an updated mitigation plan that we can all be proud of. The ESPA Mitigation Plan lays out achievable goals for all parties. Among its provisions:

- No more fighting – all parties have agreed to cease all pending litigation in this matter.
- Fairness – groundwater districts will now be evaluated individually and not collectively. The 2015 Mitigation Plan had said that if one of the nine groundwater districts failed to comply with the plan's agreed-upon terms, then all nine



districts were jointly at fault. The 2024 plan makes each groundwater pumper responsible for themselves only.

- Averaging – rather than having annual allotments, farmers using groundwater will now take their water share in four-year increments. This empowers the farmers to make management decisions that fit their crop rotations.
- Conserving the water – collectively, groundwater districts must conserve 205,000 acre-feet of water annually to help preserve the health of the aquifer. The districts can also now include private recharge, not only as a tool to meet conservation efforts but also as a means to increase their water allocations.
- Measurement – accurate, timely measurement practices are now required of all water users. It's impossible to administer anything that we're not accurately measuring.

The ESPA Mitigation Plan is a binding legal agreement. We think it is well crafted and durable enough to stand the test of time, but the water users and the state will review the plan in four years to see how it has fared.

I am very grateful to Jeff Raybould, chair of the Idaho Water Resources Board, whose help in these critical negotiations was invaluable.

I especially commend our water users for their determination and their willingness to set aside their own preconceived notions in order to understand the needs of their regional neighbors.

I am thankful that all parties involved were able to cooperate in developing a path forward that puts the long-term health of our state and our people first.

This is the true Idaho way. We may still have some obstacles to overcome, but these past few months of negotiations have proven to me that by listening to each other and finding common ground, we can balance the needs of our agricultural producers, our communities, and our future generations.

The age-old saying remains true: we are stronger together. ■





Photos by John O'Connell

As the sun rises over the mountains in the Wood River Valley, Kirby Lau stands by a flag marking the location of a rodent trap she set out in the sagebrush-covered hills at U of I's Rinker Rock Creek Ranch. Lau is researching how the long-lasting herbicide Rejuvra indirectly affects rodents and sage grouse.

## Rodent research: U of I grad studies herbicide effects on sage grouse, small mammals

By John O'Connell  
*University of Idaho*

MOSCOW, Idaho – Cow Camp is dark and quiet when Kirby Lau and Harrison Eckard-Garrett emerge from their canvas wall tents with gear in hand at 4:30 a.m. on June 25.

Their pickup truck rumbles along a rutted, dirt road over sagebrush-covered hills within University of Idaho's Rinker Rock Creek Ranch, located in the Wood River Valley in the state's southcentral region.

They arrive at their research site just as the sun begins to rise over the Pioneer Mountains. After assembling their kits, they split

up to cover more ground, knowing their success rate at trapping rodents has been steadily increasing and it's likely to be a long morning.

Lau, of North Carolina, is a U of I graduate student seeking a master's degree in natural resources, with an emphasis on wildlife. The thesis project she began in the fall of 2022 and will complete next spring involves studying how applications of the long-lasting herbicide Rejuvra affect sage grouse and small mammal ecology.

Federal land managers believe Rejuvra, which contains the active ingredient indaziflam, could provide a more cost-effective and longer-lasting tool in their efforts to control invasive annual

grasses. Rejuvra treatments were made at the research site in 2019 and 2020.

“We’re going to see how the herbicide affects the vegetation and how the vegetation affects use by rodents and grouse,” Lau says. “There’s quite a bit of cheatgrass and field brome here. Our hope is the herbicide will control annuals and release native perennials from competition with the annuals.”

Every evening, Lau and Eckard-Garrett, who is the research technician she hired to aid in data collection, use peanut butter, oats and sunflower seeds to bait nearly 200 metal-box Sherman traps spaced 10 meters apart throughout the sagebrush steppe.

They return at the crack of dawn the following morning to check their traps, affixing ear tags on every captured rodents and recording their size and location, as well as the tag number of any rodent that was previously captured. Such recaptures give them insights into rodents’ distribution, survival and ability to find resources within treated areas.

Thus far, it appears to Lau that there are no obvious negative impacts on grouse habitat use in tracts treated with the herbicide, and there is potential for increased use in these areas. Prior work at the ranch analyzed plant community responses and changes in fire risk following Rejuvra applications.

Research at Rinker Rock Creek Ranch is conducted in partnership by the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs) and the College of Natural Resources (CNR). Tim Prather, a professor of plant sciences in CALs and associate director of the Rangeland Center, and Tracey Johnson, an associate professor in CNR and director of research at Rinker Rock Creek Ranch, are advisors on Lau’s thesis.

“When you take a look at the prevalence of fire in the sage steppe right now, having a tool like Rejuvra is really important to deal with that fire return interval and the size of the fires,” Prather says. “It’s also important as a public lands manager that you can confidently say your management action is not negatively impacting the native plant communities or the wildlife species within the plant communities where you’re using this herbicide.”

On this morning, Lau and Eckard-Garrett confirm about 50 metal boxes, marked by colorful flags, harbor pocket mice, deer mice, voles and the occasional chipmunk, a record for the project at the time. Rodent populations are cyclical, and their numbers have exploded this summer.

Lau moves briskly from trap to trap, understanding time is of the essence to ensure the rodents are processed and released before the heat of day arrives.

Lau, who attended North Carolina State University and studied

biology as an undergraduate, worked as a technician on wildlife projects for about three and a half years before seeing a job posting for her current master’s position at U of I.

“We hadn’t done any small mammal work at the ranch prior to this project,” Johnson says. “She didn’t have any baseline information on what she might catch or what the densities of small mammals might be. She was a little bit without some of the information that would have been nice to have, but she moved forward anyway and has been very successful.”

Regarding the other prong of her study, Lau pioneered a new method for monitoring sage grouse that promises to save future researchers considerable time in the field. The accepted way of

estimating grouse use of habitat is typically checking for bird scat at specific intervals along predetermined lines through the landscape, known as transects.

In addition to scat monitoring, Lau set up 45 trail cameras, remotely capturing 650 images of sage grouse using the habitat in 2023 alone. She was convinced advancements in software and artificial intelligence would enable her to succeed with trail cameras where others have failed.

Lau now plans to publish a separate scientific paper detailing how trail cameras and scat monitoring produced comparable results for estimating sage grouse use of control versus

treated habitat. Aside from the time savings, researchers can glean additional information from images about grouse numbers, sex and behaviors.

“Nobody had really done that in the published literature, not only for sage grouse, but also for the other ground-dwelling birds,” Johnson says. “I told her, ‘This is going to be a lot of extra work. If you want to drop that aspect of the project, I’m OK with that.’ Kirby said, ‘Let’s just try it.’ It paid off in dividends.”

Lau’s research has also entailed months of spartan living in an encampment known as Cow Camp. The primitive camp lacks running water, electricity, cell service and refrigeration. Yet Cow Camp has unique perks – spectacular sunsets, starry nights, a panoramic of mountain views, diverse wildlife and a quiet broken only by the sounds of nature.

Most importantly for Cow Camp’s residents, life at the ranch is an opportunity to work in a unique, living laboratory for rangeland research.

“I was very uncertain about how much I was going to enjoy coming out here,” says Eckard-Garrett, who recently earned a bachelor’s degree from Simpson College in central Iowa and shares Lau’s enthusiasm for small mammals. “This is the first time I’ve ever been out West for an extended period of time, and it’s been amazing.” ■



**Kirby Lau fits an ear tag on a mouse captured in a metal box trap within the sagebrush-covered hills at University of Idaho's Rinker Rock Creek Ranch in the Wood River Valley.**



# RENTS

*Continued from page 3*

According to USDA's 2022 Census of Agriculture, Idaho lost 144,000 acres of farmland between 2017 and 2022.

NASS also estimates the average farm real estate value per acre in Idaho at \$4,390 per acre in 2024, up 5 percent from 2023 (\$4,190).

Rising farmland values due to high buyer demand and inflation in general are also pushing up rents, said Brett Wilder, an agricultural economist with University of Idaho.

Farmland rental rates in Idaho differ greatly depending on location and which commodity is being grown and some rental rates are much higher than the average rate reported by NASS, Wilder said.

"Those NASS numbers are an average and they vary widely," he said. "It depends on what type of crops are grown there, what kind of ground it is..."

For example, someone growing potatoes, sugar beets, seed crops, etc., would likely pay more for the ground than someone growing grain.

Wilder cautioned about using average cropland rental rates as a hard determining factor in how much to pay to rent cropland.

"There are a lot of factors that go into the value of ag land," Wilder said. "Those NASS numbers are good for determining trends."

They are, he added, less reliable for determining what someone should pay for a specific piece of land.

The average rental price for all cropland in Idaho has risen 6 percent since 2022 and 30 percent since 2019. The average rental rate for irrigated cropland in the state has risen 5 percent since 2022 and 28 percent since 2019.

The average rental rate for all cropland in the United States rose 3 percent, from \$155 an acre to \$160 per acre from 2023 to 2024, according to NASS. It has risen 15 percent since 2020.

According to NASS, Jerome County had the highest average rental rate for irrigated cropland in Idaho in 2024, at \$415 per acre. That was up from \$398 per acre in 2023.

The average rental rate for irrigated cropland in Gooding County last year was \$398 per acre, up from \$385 per acre.

Minidoka County's average rental rate for irrigated cropland in 2024 was \$369, up from \$345.

Elmore County came in at \$360 per acre (down from \$364) and Cassia County was at \$359 (\$345).

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# Vexing vertebrates – damage identification

By Chris Schnepf  
*University of Idaho*

When we think of organisms that stifle or kill trees, insects and fungi are often the first things to come to mind. But vertebrate species can also have a big impact on forest growth, especially for younger trees.

Typically, this is referred to by foresters as “animal damage,” though technically insects are animals too.

As any Idaho gardener can attest, vertebrate species such as various rodents, deer, and elk can interfere with growing plants and trees. As with so many things, correctly identifying the problem is critical.

Sometimes the responsible animal is obvious (e.g., the large chips at the base of a cottonwood or a dammed-up culvert left by a beaver). Other issues are less clear without closer study.

Rodent species (mice, voles, pocket gophers, hares, beavers, and porcupines) can injure trees of all sizes, and the damage is often distinguished by teeth marks left from chewing the bark off the tree (feeding on the cambium just under the tree bark) or by neatly clipped stems or roots.

Pocket gophers may well kill more tree seedlings and saplings than any other animal. They can girdle the base of seedlings or chew off their roots.

Mice and voles can also kill young trees near the soil surface – most frequently trees planted in meadows or fields.

Snowshoe hares can girdle or clip young trees in the winter, particularly when their population cycles are peaking.

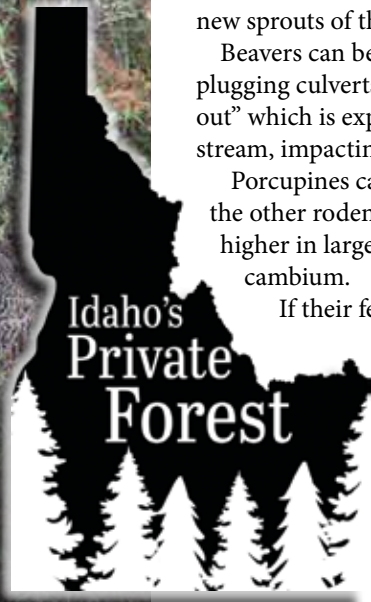
Beavers sometimes kill trees near streams. Typically, beavers feed on cottonwoods, willows, and alder, but thankfully new sprouts of these species come up from the roots.

Beavers can be a much bigger problem near roads. Beavers plugging culverts to create dams can lead to roads “blowing out” which is expensive to repair and sends sediment downstream, impacting fish and other aquatic creatures.

Porcupines can kill tree seedlings and saplings, but unlike the other rodents, porcupines will also climb 10 feet or higher in larger trees (usually in the winter) to feed on cambium.

If their feeding encircles the trunk, it kills the top, which often creates a forked top, resulting in a structurally weaker and less valuable

**BACKGROUND: Black bears have been causing extensive damage to western white pine in the Priest River Basin.**  
Photos by Chris Schnepf





tree. Ponderosa pine is the most common recipient of porcupines' attention, in part because ponderosa pine often grows on drier sites with lots of rocks.

Porcupines will bury their heads in rocks, presenting predators with a back end full of quills. Porcupines also like to chew up a whole range of human artifacts near forests, ranging from axe handles to radiator hoses.

Deer and elk frequently feed on the buds and succulent new growth of conifers, especially recently planted seedlings.

Typically, deer and elk leave a ragged, splintered break in a tree seedling stem, as opposed to the neat clips left by rodents. Deer and elk feeding can kill new seedlings, especially if they pull a freshly planted seedling from the ground in the process.

Otherwise, their feeding slows trees' growth and can create forked trees. On sites where deer browse the same trees every year, you can get "bonsai-ed" conifers that can look more like bushes than trees for many years.

Deer and elk may also damage or kill saplings, particularly trees that have been pruned, by using them to rub the velvet off the antlers in the fall, though this type of damage is usually limited to a few trees.

Cattle can also damage young tree seedlings. Many people presume cattle browse seedlings, but typically they trample seedlings, particularly if cattle are heavily concentrated in a plantation.

The main response strategy is to use herding, salting, or other means to reduce cattle presence in plantations until the seedlings are 4-5 feet tall.

Finally, black bears occasionally tear bark off the base of trees in the spring to feed on the cambium, which is high in sugars.

Bear damage is distinguished from rodent damage by long vertical grooves left in the wood. Bear damage is more common in some regions than others.

In the Idaho panhandle, bear damage has long been commonly observed with young cedar and larch. In recent years, black bears have caused extensive damage to pruned and thinned western white pine in the Priest River Basin.

To accurately assess animal damage, it



TOP: Porcupines commonly create forked tree tops. ABOVE: Pocket gophers can kill many tree seedlings.

is vital to measure a grid of small stocking plots, as animal damage may be easy to miss (especially with seedling-sized dead trees) if you just walk through the site.

Generally, three 1/100th acre plots per acre, spread evenly across the unit should be sufficient. On management units smaller than 4 acres, use at least 10 plots.

This practice is also important to assess seedling survival from moisture stress or other factors, so you know early on if you need to plant more trees.

The University of Idaho and our neighboring partner land grant universities have publications on some of these animals in different contexts – check their extension publication web sites for more information.

But if you are not finding what you are looking for, or want additional information, a good place to start is the "Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management" ([www.icwdm.org](http://www.icwdm.org)).

This site provides science-based information on managing wildlife damage and resolving human-wildlife conflicts. If you click on the "Species" tab, you will see lists of species that can cause conflict, some of which you might not have imagined could be a problem (armadillos, who knew?).

Within each of the species' tabs you can burrow into more information on everything from biology to damage identification and prevention and control methods.

Idaho Department of Fish and Game personnel may be able to provide help as well.

In addition to their understanding of the laws regarding direct control of these animals, IDFG staff are accustomed to dealing with wildlife conflicts with agriculture and staff may be able to give you some local insights into strategies to deal with wildlife/forestry conflicts as well.

The USDA Animal Plant Health Inspection service is the federal agency that deals with human/wildlife conflicts and may also be able to provide some help – see <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife-state-offices>.

My next column will address management strategies to reduce animal damage impacts. ■

*Chris Schnepf is an area extension educator in forestry for the University of Idaho in Bonner, Boundary, Kootenai and Benewah counties. He can be reached at [cschnepf@uidaho.edu](mailto:cschnepf@uidaho.edu).*





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# U of I, USDA demo robotic weeding system

*“It’s all about sustainability. The robotic device U of I is developing underscores the Forest Service’s commitment to conservation leadership and biological diversity.”*

– Kas Dumroese, retired senior research scientist, USFS

## University of Idaho news release

MOSCOW, Idaho – University of Idaho recently demonstrated an advanced robotic device used to eradicate weeds at the Coeur d’Alene Nursery.

The project is in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to improve national reforestation efforts. The 3-foot-wide autonomous wheeled robot, designed by U of I computer science students, uses artificial intelligence to scan, identify and precisely locate weed growth up to one-half inch. The robot uses electricity to eradicate weeds.

“It’s all about sustainability. The robotic device U of I is developing underscores the Forest Service’s commitment to conservation leadership and biological diversity,” said Kas Dumroese, a retired senior research scientist for the U.S. Forest Service who led the initial development of the project. “Autonomous weed eradication will reduce our labor costs and reliance on chemical pesticides and fossil fuels, improving locally adapted plants and strengthening reforestation efforts.”

Dumroese and representatives from all six Forest Service nurseries nationwide were present to witness the demonstration.

The U.S. spends approximately \$500,000 annually on weeding at its national tree seedling nurseries. Reducing weeds will improve access to soil nutrients, strengthen seedling quality, reduce nursery costs and ultimately improve reforestation success.

Next steps for the robot include weatherizing hardware, improving electrical components and using images captured during demonstrations to improve weed identification.

Data collection and testing will continue through 2025, and potential future work could include system testing on other nursery fields and using weather data to aid in weed management efforts.

U of I recently earned a grant from the USDA to develop the robot. The U of I team includes computer science graduate students Garrett Wells of Boise and Brent Knopp of Coeur d’Alene;



University of Idaho Coeur d’Alene photo

**University of Idaho Coeur d’Alene doctoral student and Project Evergreen principal researcher Garrett Wells will build and test an automated weed detection and eradication system for U.S. Forest Service’s tree nurseries.**

undergraduate student Kevin Wing of Coeur d’Alene; John Shovic, director of U of I’s Center for Intelligent Industrial Robotics; and Mary Everett of Lewiston, a postdoctoral researcher at the center.

“Working with industry, our students can fully understand the needs of the people behind the goal,” Shovic said. “Our students take the hands-on experience they gain at the center and use it to fulfill a real need at the national level.”

U of I College of Engineering students work directly with state-of-the-art mobile and full-size robots used in a variety of applications through the Center for Intelligent Industrial Robotics.

Robotics research and training labs across the state prepare students to fill global manufacturing labor shortages. The center also offers Idaho’s first industrial robotics certificates. ■

*For more information, visit [uidaho.edu/engr/programs/cda](http://uidaho.edu/engr/programs/cda) or contact U of I Coeur d’Alene’ Robotics program at (208) 292-2509.*



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# Idaho Farm Bureau Federation conducts livestock conflict and depredation survey

By **Dexton Lake**  
*Idaho Farm Bureau Federation*

BOISE – In a continuous effort to address and understand livestock-predator conflicts in Idaho, the Idaho Farm Bureau Federation hired intern Anna Nelson to conduct a comprehensive survey of livestock producers in the state.

The goal of the study was to capture the experiences of Idaho livestock owners dealing with predator interactions in the years 2021, 2022, and 2023, from sightings to verifiable/confirmed depredation incidents.

This survey sheds light on the pressing issues that livestock owners face, including types of predator conflicts, knowledge on mitigation strategies, and the effectiveness of government compensation programs.

The survey was designed mainly to gather detailed insights and personal experiences from livestock owners rather than focus on numbers. It aimed to understand and capture the thoughts and perspectives of those directly affected.

It did not seek to report on frequency of depredation or even to report the number of different types of depredations across the state. Rather, it sought to gain what livestock producers felt would be helpful to them if they experience depredations.

## Key findings

The findings of this study underscore the complex nature of wildlife management, and the economic and operational challenges faced by Idaho livestock owners.

The most common types of depredations occurred from wolves, coyotes, and mountain lions. Respondents reported numerous incidents of predator sightings and depredation cases, which impacted various livestock types, especially cows, calves, and yearlings.

Many livestock owners, confident in their ability to identify predator kills, also expressed the desire for education and training to better recognize and document depredation events.

## Conflict and depredation management

Most respondents who experienced predator conflicts employed hunting and trapping on their property to manage predator presence. Unfortunately, as of this year, there are certain areas of Idaho where wolf trapping is not allowed due to the supposed danger to grizzly bears.

There was also widespread interest in exploring alternative inspection services aside from Wildlife Services, with suggestions ranging from involving local sheriff departments to leveraging Idaho Fish and Game resources.

Notably, many livestock owners indicated that some incidents

*‘It is critical that our policies and practices always reflect the current situation. Continuing to adapt wildlife management policies will remain essential to maintain economic vitality of Idaho’s agricultural sector.’*

went unreported, often due to a lack of conclusive evidence of predation signs, mistaken as natural with scavenging by predators postmortem, or because of perceived ineffectiveness of reporting through federal agencies.

## Awareness and use of government programs

The survey revealed a varied understanding among livestock owners of government programs designed to offset economic losses due to depredation. While some respondents applied for compensation and received funding, others were unaware of available resources.

Respondents voiced concerns about whether the current compensation programs sufficiently address the economic repercussions of depredation, which can significantly impact their operations.

## Conclusion

This survey serves as a call for action, highlighting the need for enhanced resources, clear communication regarding available compensation programs, and more effective predator management strategies across Idaho.

It will greatly benefit Idaho Farm Bureau members as policy is implemented at the local, state, and national level, highlighting the difficulties producers face with predators.

It also highlights the changing causes of depredation from grazing year to grazing year. For instance, while this survey only reported two incidents of grizzly bear conflict, Idaho Fish and Game reported for the 2024 grazing year 23 head of cattle confirmed killed by the protected species just in eastern Idaho.

It is critical that our policies and practices always reflect the current situation. Continuing to adapt wildlife management policies will remain essential to maintain economic vitality of Idaho’s agricultural sector.

If you are a livestock producer and did not participate in the survey but would like to record your experience informally to contribute to the advocacy efforts of Farm Bureau, please contact me at [dlake@idahofb.org](mailto:dlake@idahofb.org).

We appreciate all who participated in the survey. ■



# Idaho Farm Bureau invests \$25,000 to advance training in agriculture at CSI's new LeRoy Craig Jerome Center

College of Southern Idaho news release

TWIN FALLS — The College of Southern Idaho (CSI) is proud to announce a \$25,000 donation from Idaho Farm Bureau Federation to support its new meat processing program, a key initiative at the LeRoy Craig Jerome Center.

With CSI's two-to-one matching campaign – the state, through the end of the year, is matching any funds to support in-demand careers – this contribution will generate \$75,000 to enhance the program and its ability to prepare students for in-demand careers in agriculture.

This investment comes at a time when Idaho's agricultural workforce is experiencing significant growth and evolving demands for technical expertise.

CSI's meat processing program is specifically designed to address these needs by equipping students with cutting-edge skills and hands-on training to succeed in one of Idaho's most vital industries.

“Technical training is the backbone of a thriving agricultural economy,” said CSI President Dr. Dean Fisher. “With Idaho Farm Bureau's support, CSI is building capacity to meet the workforce needs of today and tomorrow, ensuring students are prepared to contribute to our state's economic and community well-being.”

The new LeRoy Craig Jerome Center is a response to CSI's steadily increasing enrollment and the pressing demand for workforce-ready graduates in southern Idaho.

Housing programs like meat processing, the center will serve as a regional hub for technical training and innovation, fostering growth in key industries.

“The agricultural sector is central to Idaho's identity and economy, and it depends on a skilled workforce,” said Idaho Farm Bureau Federation President Bryan Searle. “By supporting CSI's efforts, Idaho Farm Bureau is helping to ensure that students have access to top-notch technical education, benefiting our farms, food producers, and the broader community.”

CSI's matching campaign is focused on building capacity in programs that directly address workforce shortages.

Donations supporting the meat processing program, automation engineering technology, and the radiologic technology program are matched two-to-one, tripling their impact.

“Every dollar given to these programs translates to real opportunities for students and real solutions for industries in need of talent,” said Fisher.

With the upcoming opening of the LeRoy Craig Jerome Center, CSI is positioned to play a pivotal role in shaping the future workforce of Idaho.

Through innovative programming and strong industry partnerships, the college is ensuring students gain the skills needed to thrive while bolstering economic growth in the region.

To join Idaho Farm Bureau and others in supporting these transformative efforts, visit [foundation.csi.edu/match](http://foundation.csi.edu/match) or contact the CSI Foundation at (208) 732-6245.

About the College of Southern Idaho

The College of Southern Idaho is a comprehensive community college dedicated to providing career-focused education and workforce training. CSI partners with local industries to meet the region's evolving workforce needs and empower students to succeed in high-demand fields. ■



## Country Chuckles **By Jonny Hawkins**



“He got into the grass mixed with cannabis. You better come down off your high horse, Becky.”

# U of I ag forecasts very close to USDA data

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – In January, University of Idaho agricultural economists told legislators they estimated Idaho’s 22,800 farms and ranches brought in a total of \$11.157 billion in gross farm revenue in 2023.

On Sept. 5, USDA released official data showing how much farm revenue each state brought in last year. It showed Idaho’s ag producers brought in \$11.036 billion in gross farm revenue.

That means the economists’ estimate came within 1 percent of the official USDA numbers, and their calculations were made a full eight months before the USDA data was calculated.

Each January, UI economists provide members of the Idaho Legislature’s Joint Legislative Economic Outlook and Revenue Assessment Committee with an estimate of how Idaho agriculture fared the previous year.

Because agriculture is so important to Idaho, legislators use that estimate to help them forecast how much revenue the state will take in that fiscal year, and that revenue estimate in turn is used during the legislative session to set state budgets.

Sen. Van Burtenshaw, a member of the committee, said the forecasts the committee gets from various sources are really significant because they help legislators determine the amount of revenue to include in the state budget.

He was happy to hear the U of I forecast was so close.

“The more accurate they are, the more precise we can be in the budgeting process,” he said.



Idaho Farm Bureau Federation photo

Especially in recent years, the annual January estimates by U of I agricultural economists on how the state’s farming industry fared have closely matched USDA’s official numbers.

The estimates are included in U of I’s annual, *The Financial Condition of Idaho Agriculture* report.

Two Januaries ago, the U of I economists estimated Idaho’s farmers and ranchers brought in \$11.041 billion in total revenue in 2022, while the official USDA data for that year showed \$11.283 billion, a difference of 2.19 percent.

Three years ago, the economists estimated Idaho’s farmers and ranchers brought in \$8.882 billion in total revenue in 2021, while the official USDA data for that year showed \$8.733 billion, a difference of 1.68 percent.

U of I Agricultural Economist Brett Wilder, one of the authors of the report, said it’s something legislators and the industry ask for.

Every three years, a separate U of I report shows the total impact agriculture has on the state economy.

“Between the two, it gives state and

county officials tools they can use to make important decisions,” Wilder said.

As an example of how close this year’s estimate was, the ag economists estimated that the state’s wheat farmers brought in a total of \$685 million in 2023, while the USDA data shows \$678 million, a difference of 1 percent.

And, the economists estimated that the state’s milk farmers brought in a total of \$3.5 billion in 2023, while the USDA data shows \$3.46 billion, a difference of 1.22 percent.

The *Financial Condition of Idaho Agriculture* report also estimates total net farm income – which amounts to a farmer’s paycheck – but that is a finer art and can bounce around from year to year.

Wilder says the gross revenue amount is important because it gives lawmakers a pretty good idea of what agriculture’s impact on the state’s economy will be in the coming year.

That money that is spent by farmers and ranchers, in turn, helps underpin the overall economy, especially in rural areas that are highly dependent on agriculture, he says. ■



# U of I researcher helping develop technology to optimize dairy nutrition

By John O'Connell  
University of Idaho

MOSCOW, Idaho — Researchers from University of Idaho's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences are aiding in a multi-institutional project to develop and test a precision feeding system that optimizes rations to meet the nutritional needs of individual dairy cows.

The research team's Self-learning Dairy (SLDairy) technology works with existing equipment used by automatic milking systems, where cows may enter a stall with a robotic milker under their own volition and feed is automatically dispensed as an incentive to lure them inside.

The team's cloud-based system monitors each cow's performance in real time to adjust delivery of food pellets from the automated stations as needed, based on nutritional models, herd management software data, feeding software data, and records from the robotic milking system about milk production and milk components.

One of the expected outcomes is that the technology will help dairies select animals to breed that most efficiently convert feed into milk and nitrogen into milk protein.

The project, which launched in October, is funded with a four-year, \$1.15 million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

U of I will receive about \$370,000 of the funding. Most of U of I's share is supporting nutrition and modeling work by Izabelle Teixeira, a UI Extension dairy specialist. Teixeira will recruit a doctoral student and a postdoctoral researcher to aid in the project.

UI Extension Agricultural Economist Hernan Tejeda is helping with an economic analysis of the savings achieved through implementation of the system.

The team also includes Virginia Tech University as the lead institution and researchers from University of Nebraska, Colorado State University, University of Tennessee and Emory University.

Though cows within a dairy herd have varying nutritional requirements, most dairies feed a ration designed for an average cow.

Teixeira uses the analogy of giving medium-sized shirts to a large group of people. The shirts will fit about a third of the group members but will be either too small or too large for about two-thirds of them.

Optimizing rations should help dairies avoid both underfeeding at the expense of milk production and overfeeding, which results in unnecessary feed cost.

"Our expectation is feeding each cow in a proper way is going



Photo by Sean Ellis

University of Idaho researchers are involved in research to develop and test a precision feeding system that optimizes rations to meet the nutritional needs of individual dairy cows.

*"Dairy farming has always required a careful balance between maximizing production and reducing costs, all while managing environmental impact."*

*– Izabelle Teixeira, UI Extension dairy specialist*

to save money, help the environment and boost production," Teixeira said.

SLDairy provides a partial-mixed ration in a feed bunk. Individual cows supplement what they receive from the feed bunk at the automated milking stalls, which each have two feed lines filled with different grain blends in pellet form.

Pellets are dispensed based on each cow's specific protein and amino acid needs, as determined by modeling of data.

In small-scale testing at a Tennessee research dairy, the team documented considerable savings made possible by the system.

The system will be tested at two commercial dairies in participating states next fall, followed by testing at two more commercial dairies in the spring of 2026.

In addition to assisting with nutritional modeling, Teixeira will also help with an Extension component of the project starting next year, initially sharing general information pertaining to dairy cow nutrition and eventually sharing results of the project, as well as instructions in how to implement the SLDairy system.

"Dairy farming has always required a careful balance between maximizing production and reducing costs, all while managing environmental impact," Teixeira said. "SLDairy is a self-learning feeding system that aims to make this balance easier by using available technology to refine how we feed dairy cows." ■

# Erika Zundel's durable merino wool saddle pads protect horses

By Dianna Troyer

For Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

Riding long days at the Flying H Ranch near Riddle in southwestern Idaho, Erika Zundel needed a comfortable and durable saddle pad for her horse.

"It's all about making the horse comfortable," Zundel said of the 2-inch-thick pads she makes using a latch hook process and soft, thick Merino wool of various colors.

About four years ago, Zundel learned to make the saddle pads during a class at a nearby bed and breakfast, where the owners offer craft sessions for guests as well as area residents.

The instructor, Jean Spratling from Starr Valley in northeastern Nevada, has been making the pulled wool saddle blankets for decades and teaching classes, too.

"They last more than 20 years and help prevent dry sweats and saddle sores," Spratling said in a YouTube video while teaching a two-day workshop at the Western Folklife Center in Elko.

Zundel uses a latch-hook process and pulls strands of soft wool through a canvas with pre-made holes in it.

"I use top Merino wool that's ready to spin and is extremely soft," she said. "It's super durable, too."

She divides the strands into thirds. Next, she cuts a custom-sized piece of sturdy latch-hook canvas with 3.3 holes per square inch.

The canvas is made in England for rugs and other products. Using a steel hook, she pushes the yarn up through the holes and back down.

"You do every other hole and every other row," Zundel said. "After a while, you fine-tune how to do it. To make it extra thick, I put my thumb in the loop underneath and on top to hold it out more. How far you pull the wool through determines the thickness."

After Zundel's boyfriend saw how well her saddle pad worked, he asked her to make one for him.

"Pretty soon our friends wanted pads, too," Zundel said. "It's all been word-of-mouth."



**ABOVE: Erika Zundel relies on a thick latch-hook saddle pad she made to keep her horse Daryl, a mustang from Salt Wells Creek in Wyoming, comfortable while working on the Flying H Ranch near Riddle in Owyhee County of southwestern Idaho.**

**RIGHT: Zundel makes thick soft durable wool saddle pads in a variety of sizes and colors.**

Photos courtesy of Erika Zundel

She launched a Facebook page, E - Z Wool Saddle Pads, and ships her customized pads of all sizes - from ponies to horses - nationwide, particularly Utah, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho and California, and as far as Canada.

Zundel customizes orders.

"Some people want brands or initials," she said. "Others tell me to just do a design I like."

One of her pads looked like an American flag. Another was nicknamed the "Fruit Loop" because it had the colors of the breakfast cereal.



The saddle pads are easy to clean and maintain their loft. She advises hand-washing them with cool water.

"I just rinse mine off in the bathtub," she said. "It will last a long time." ■



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# LOOKING FOR A NEW PODCAST? DIRT ROAD DISCUSSIONS

## **Episode 72: Rulon Gardner: Farm Kid Who Shocked The Olympics**

Those who witnessed the 2000 Olympics will remember the David vs Goliath wrestling upset of an Idaho farm boy, Rulon Gardner, over Russia's historic dominator Aleksandr Karelin.

What most people don't know is that Rulon did not grow up as an early wrestling prodigy. There were many times in his life where he faced forks in the road to determine what he might become. In this podcast, Rulon talks about the journey from his childhood farm life to a world stage in Sydney, Australia. It is an amazing story of setbacks, grit, and resolve.

