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## Idaho

# Idaho Fish and Game seeks \$2.3M to purchase ranch

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

BOISE — Idaho Department of Fish and Game officials have asked state lawmakers for a supplemental appropriation of \$2.3 million to purchase the 10,400-acre Rock Creek Ranch in Blaine County.

Most of the property has been leased as grazing land over the years and that will continue if the department buys the land, lawmakers were told.

The previous owner, the Rinker family, worked with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service to obtain a \$3.8 million Grassland Reserve Program easement on

the land that preserves grazing, said Jeff Gould, IDFG's chief of wildlife.

The land was then sold for \$2.2 million to the Nature Conservancy and Wood River Land Trust.

The previous owners intended to leave the property as a working ranch and preserve its wildlife values and public access, Gould said.

"The easement protects wildlife habitat and maintains the property as a working ranch," he said. "IDFG was viewed as the entity with the most appropriate resources and expertise to own and manage the property to meet these objectives."

Gould was asked by Sen. Bert Brackett, a Republican rancher from Rogerson, whether he could provide

assurance that grazing would continue on the ranch in a meaningful fashion if IDFG purchases it.

Under the easement, "it is contractually binding for us to maintain grazing," Gould said.

After IDFG officials asked lawmakers for an additional \$2.3 million to purchase the ranch, the Senate Resources and Environment Committee invited them to present more details about the proposed purchase.

"I was concerned we didn't have enough knowledge about it," the committee chairman, Sen. Steve Bair, a Republican farmer from Blackfoot, told Gould. The \$2.3 million request "is a lot of money for something, frankly, legislators never

heard about before."

The ranch, located in the foothills of the Soldier Mountains, is surrounded by U.S. Bureau of Land Management and state of Idaho lands that are primarily used for livestock grazing and outdoor recreation and that provide extensive wildlife habitat for important game species, Gould said.

The property also contains core sage grouse habitat that is a strategic part of a larger effort to prevent an Endangered Species Act listing for the bird, he said.

The purchased easement by NRCS and the sale to the Wood River Land Trust and Nature Conservancy, as well as a sizable donation by the Rinker

family, greatly reduced the cost to purchase the property, Gould said.

"The Rinkers' vision of Rock Creek as a wildlife management area open to the public, and managed with grazing as opposed to a residential development, is a showcase opportunity," he said.

Brackett told the Capital Press later his main concern is that grazing be maintained at a viable level.

"I'm confident that, initially at least, it will be," he said.

Gregg Servheen, IDFG's wildlife program coordinator, told the Capital Press the easement covers virtually the entire ranch and "requires grazing to be used as a tool in the management of the property."

# Greater carryover allowed in Ririe Reservoir

By JOHN O'CONNELL  
Capital Press

RIRIE, Idaho — The Bureau of Reclamation has agreed to relax flood-control requirements in Ririe Reservoir, enabling irrigators to store an additional 8,000 acre feet of water through winters.

The reservoir is being managed for the extra carryover.

However, the reservoir's irrigators, represented by Mitigation, Inc., argue they'll shoulder an undo share of the financial burden to implement the plan, and it doesn't go nearly far enough toward curbing wasted water.

When they accept extra carryover and weather conditions raise the flood risk above thresholds set by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the irrigators will bear the full cost of clearing ice from the reservoir's outflow channel, in case of an emergency release.

On one of the coldest days of the winter of 2013, Mitigation, Inc., brought in contractors with backhoes to clear the channel for a test release, demonstrating the plan's viability.

Roland Springer, assistant area manager with the BOR's Upper Snake field office, said the change is based on recent findings of a \$250,000 environmental assessment, funded 80 percent by BOR appropriations and 20 percent by irrigators.



An aerial view of Ririe Dam. Water collected behind this dam was withheld while the Snake River pushed 12 feet above flood stage.

The reservoir, which is filled by Willow Creek east of Idaho Falls and drains into the Snake River north of the city, was built in the early 1970s, largely for flood control, and stores 100,000 acre feet of water.

In prior years, Springer said, water managers started the win-

ter with the reservoir at 45,000 acre feet and let it fill to no more than 50,000 acre feet, before opening the reservoir to spring runoff in late February. BOR has headed into this season with 50,000 acre feet of storage and will allow the reservoir to fill to 58,000 acre feet.

Springer believes the BOR has done as much as possible to help the irrigators without raising the flood risk. Though Springer acknowledges the reservoir could hold a significantly greater volume with little danger, he said raising the risk even slightly would require a lengthy internal process, and possibly an act of Congress.

Mitigation, Inc., Chairman Darrel Kerr, wouldn't rule out a congressional fix, believing the roughly \$50,000 cost of clearing the channel would exceed the value of the extra water. Kerr said the Corps has been too conservative, managing the reservoir for the type of flood that would occur only once in thousands of years, and advocates up to 70,000 acre feet in carryover. He'd like the BOR to share in the cost of clearing the channel, and to consider opening the reservoir to spring runoff a few days earlier.



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Wheat is harvested in a field near Nampa, Idaho, in July, 2014. Data from University of Idaho and the Idaho Department of Labor show that gross product from Idaho's farming sector is growing at a much faster rate than any other sector of the state's economy.

# Farming sector driving Idaho's gross state product growth

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

BOISE — Gross product from Idaho's farming sector is growing at a much higher rate than the overall gross state product.

And agriculture's contribution to GDP, on a percentage basis, is growing four times faster than any other sector.

GDP, like the national gross domestic product, measures the total dollar value of all goods and services produced within a state.

A new report by University of Idaho agricultural economists shows that farming gross product in Idaho grew at an annual average rate of 5.5 percent from 1980 to 2013. During that same time, total GDP grew annually at a 2.9 percent.

Those numbers were adjusted for inflation and based on U.S. Department of Commerce and Bureau of Economic Analysis data.

Gross product from Idaho's farming sector was \$2.6 billion in 2013, a 15 percent increase over 2012, and that number accounted for 4.5 percent of the state's total GDP of \$57 billion.

When agribusiness was included, the industry's share of total Idaho GDP rises to 14 percent.

The report, "Economic Contribution of Idaho Agribusiness, 2014," found that farming and agribusiness contributed \$25 billion in direct and indirect sales in 2012, making the industry responsible for 20 percent of total state sales that year.

It was also responsible for 124,000 jobs directly and indirectly, or one in every seven in Idaho, and \$3.8 billion in wages, which was \$1 of every \$8 in wages paid in the state.

That makes agriculture the state's top industry, when indirect contributions are included, said UI ag economist Garth Taylor.

# Cattle groups defend Idaho rancher in grazing reduction court cases

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

Local, state and national cattle industry groups are helping southwestern Idaho ranchers fight a legal battle they fear could set a precedent for significantly reducing grazing on federal lands in the West.

In response to a lawsuit by Western Watersheds Project, U.S. District Court Judge B. Lynn Winmill in 1999 ordered the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's Owyhee field office to rewrite 68 grazing permits that it renewed in 1997.

The permits in the so-called Owyhee 68 case include 120

grazing allotments and impact hundreds of thousands of acres of land.

Idaho-based WWP argued the permits weren't properly analyzed for their environmental impacts according to the National Environmental Policy Act.

The new permits were issued in 2013 and in most cases reduced grazing by 30 to 50 percent, according to Idaho Cattle Association officials.

ICA Executive Vice President Wyatt Prescott said his group believes the BLM reduced grazing on the allotments to try to avoid litigation with WWP.

ICA also says BLM officials didn't properly follow NEPA's requirement to consider the economic impact of their decisions on the permittees and local communities, Prescott said.

He said BLM's decisions were based largely on protecting sage grouse habitat but the agency didn't adequately consider the impacts of wildfire, which is the bird's primary threat.

If the decisions are left standing, it could set a dangerous precedent in the West, Prescott said, which is why ICA and other cattle organizations have appealed the grazing reductions.

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