

Idaho strengthens sage grouse protection

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

Idaho Gov. Butch Otter has put legal authority behind the state's management plan to protect sage grouse — one day ahead of the release of federal management plans that have been three years in the making.

The executive order demonstrates Idaho's commitment to maintaining sage grouse habitat and a viable population of the species and is an important element in the effort to avoid a listing under the Endangered Species Act, according to Otter's staff.

The order lays out the state's strategy for management on state and private land and reiterates the state's proposal for management on federal lands, said Cally Younger, associate legal counsel to the governor.

"Our hope is that (Bureau of Land Management) will incorporate the executive order in the final version" of its

land management plans, Otter Director of Communications Mark Warbis said.

The desire is for BLM and the U.S. Forest Service to use a good deal of the state's plan to protect wildlife habitat across landscapes, he said.

"What we want to avoid is a patchwork quilt" of regulation, he said.

"We're trying to preserve traditional uses. We want to save the bird without wrecking our economy," he said.

The governor's office recognizes there are differences in how federal, state and private lands should be managed. That includes state endowment lands — which must be managed for long-term benefit to its benefactors, such as schools — and private lands that fall under county permitting decisions, Warbis said.

The state's policies and plan were developed with input from industry and stakeholders and do not contain some of

the restrictions in federal plans that are viewed as unnecessary at the state level, Younger said.

Some such differences are related to mining and buffer zones in non-core sage grouse habitat. Another is the state's approach of rezoning to encourage development in areas of less important habitat, she said.

In the big picture, federal rules are more focused on restrictions and state policies are more focused on incentive. Idaho's approach is to educate and empower landowners to help achieve landscape goals, Warbis said.

The executive order gives the federal agencies an idea of Idaho's targets for sage grouse conservation, and it's important to help inform those agencies as they go through the rest of the process of finalizing management plans, he said.

It will also help in the governor's consistency review of the federal management

plans, which is now in its 60-day comment period on the proposed plans, Younger said.

It is also hoped demonstrating the state's efforts and commitment will have a positive influence on U.S. Fish and Wildlife's upcoming decision on listing sage grouse, she said.

Everyone is hopeful it will carry some weight and show the state is doing things to help the bird, said public lands rancher Mike Guerry, chairman of the Three Creek Rangeland Fire Protection Association.

And hopefully the Interior Department's recent decision that a listing isn't warranted for a sage grouse population on the Nevada-California border will be favorable for Idaho, whose conservation efforts are widely recognized, he said.

Conservation efforts are good, but there'll always be the challenge of large wildfires — the biggest threat to sage grouse, he said.



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Mike Kiester, a research assistant at University of Idaho's Parma experiment station, looks at damaged fruit trees May 26. Researchers and commercial growers in Southwestern Idaho are beginning to see the full extent of the damage caused by a sudden November cold snap.

Idaho fruit growers seeing full extent of November cold snap

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

CALDWELL, Idaho — The effects that a sudden mid-November cold snap had on commercial fruit trees in Southwestern Idaho are now becoming visible.

Growers and researchers had suspected the four-day stretch of record-low temperatures caused widespread damage to fruit trees in the region and now they're beginning to see the full extent of that damage.

"It appears some of the damage is pretty substantial," said Chad Henggeler, field manager for Henggeler Packing Co. in Fruitland.

The damage varies greatly by variety, and even from tree to tree, and is major in some cases, said University of Idaho researcher Essie Fallahi, who heads UI's pomology program.

"Depending on the variety and location, the damage could be significant," he said. "But we are going to survive fine. It's not to the extent where it will put people out of business."

Commercial growers agreed with that assessment.

"Certain varieties are worse than others," said Michael Williamson, manager of Williamson Orchards near Caldwell. "It's just a reduction; it's not like it

wiped us out or anything." The damage was caused by a sudden drop in temperatures below zero degrees, before fruit trees had a chance to go into dormancy.

Many trees have long cracks on them that occurred when sap and water that hadn't gone down to the root system caused the wood to split open, said Mike Kiester, a research assistant at UI's Parma experiment station.

In general, apples appear to have weathered the freeze better than other fruit, researchers and commercial growers said.

"The majority of our apples are fine; we are going to have a good crop," said Fallahi, who works closely with commercial growers in the region.

But some younger apple varieties were hit hard, Henggeler said. He said his 5,000 Granny Smith varieties younger than 3 years old were almost completely wiped out by the cold, as were his nursery trees.

"Apples probably look the best," he said. "The older trees look pretty good."

Prunes suffered extensive damage.

"Prunes have been grown in the valley for almost 120 years and we've never seen this kind of damage to our prune trees before," Henggeler said.

Thresher overhauling East Idaho elevators

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BLACKFOOT, Idaho — Officials with Thresher Artisan Wheat say improvements they're making this summer to five Eastern Idaho grain elevators should help expedite harvest for their local growers.

Thresher, a subsidiary of the Kansas-based holding company Agspring, acquired General Mills' Eastern Idaho grain handling infrastructure last season.

Thresher has started overhauling its elevators in Blackfoot, American Falls, Rockford and Newdale, as well as the Moreland grain elevator, which it acquired in March. The projects, scheduled for completion prior to harvest, should increase Thresher's grain handling capacity by nearly 2.5 million bushels, said CEO Don Wille.

"We needed to speed up our process of handling grain," Wille said. "Farmers want to dump quick and get back to the field."

At each facility, Thresher will implement new technology enabling drivers to weigh their loads, have grain samples taken



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Todd Perman, manager of the Thresher Artisan Wheat grain elevator in American Falls, Idaho, leads a tour of the site where his company has begun excavation of a new scale and grain storage facility.

and analyzed on site and receive tickets for each delivery without exiting the truck.

Wille also plans to eventually email tickets, as well as grain quality analysis, directly to growers, which he said will provide them critical harvest information a day or two earlier than they currently receive it. Samples are now tested off site, and drivers must exit their vehicles to pick up their tickets.

In American Falls, elevator manager Todd Perman

said grain has been stored in a 1.5-million-bushel uncovered pile near the local high school. Thresher has started excavating a new facility out of town, which should resolve city residents' concerns about traffic and odor from wet grain.

Perman said grain will be stored in open bins, and a weather monitoring station will trigger a tarp to cover them if it begins to rain. Perman said a modern conveyor will load the new facility, re-

placing a slower auger system.

"I bet we can cut a week off harvest just by being able to dump their trucks faster and get them back to the field," Perman said.

Wille said growers in Newdale, where a modern structure will replace an elevator built in 1947, should notice the most significant improvements.

"The facility will be much more fluid, and they're going to be able to dump trucks in half the time," Wille said.

Two canal drownings increase urgency of safety campaigns

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

MERIDIAN, Idaho — Following the recent drowning deaths of two people in Southwestern Idaho canals, irrigation districts in the area feel a sense of urgency to remind the public that canals are dangerous places to be around.

An average of three people a year die in Idaho canals and

irrigation ditches, according to Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District officials, but two people, including a toddler, have already drowned in Treasure Valley canals since April.

"This unfortunately is an unusual year because we've started out very early," said Daren Coon, secretary-treasurer of NMID, Idaho's largest in terms of patrons. "We hope it's an anomaly, that the rest of the

year will end more peacefully and there won't be any more incidences."

NMID borrowed the services of Bureau of Reclamation water safety mascot Otto Otter to remind parents and their children that canals are not playgrounds.

During the annual Meridian Public Works Week, which attracts thousands of people, the life-sized mascot handed out

coloring books to children that serve as reminders to them and their parents of the dangers canals pose.

Otter is a magnet for children and can carry that water safety message more effectively than adults, Coon said.

"Canals are not playgrounds and people drown in them. It's extremely important that parents understand that so they can educate their children to stay

away from them," Coon said.

To make its way to farm country, irrigation water stored in the Boise River system winds its way west through a maze of hundreds of miles of canals, laterals and irrigation districts that plow straight through Idaho's largest cities of Boise, Meridian and Nampa.

As the valley continues its rapid growth, getting that water safety message out is only becoming more important, and the tragic start to this year's irrigation season only heightens the concern, Coon said.

Besides NMID's annual TV and radio water safety campaign, district officials also attend myriad events where there are opportunities to remind people of the dangers canals pose.

Pioneer Irrigation District contributes to several water safety campaigns in the region and posts "irrigation use only"


and "no swimming" signs along its canals and uses gates in particularly dangerous areas, said PID Manager Mark Zirschky.

But that's still not enough, in some cases, he said.

After a retention pond in Caldwell flooded during a recent rainstorm, PID employees saw a kayak and kids with snorkels playing in it, oblivious to the extreme danger they would have been in had the clogged discharge pump suddenly cleared.

"There were adults everywhere," Zirschky said. "They continued to allow the 'fun' to go on."

Zirschky said PID fights a constant but important battle on educating the public about canal dangers with a simple but strong message: "Stay alive by staying out. If you jump into one of these canals, there's a better than even chance it's not going to end well."



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