

Blackfoot ag companies host first Tractor Treat

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BLACKFOOT, Idaho — From now on, Julie Ann Morris anticipates dressing up large agricultural equipment will be part of the Halloween tradition in this Eastern Idaho community, and more of its children will choose farm-themed costumes.

Morris, a service writer at the AGCO dealer Agri-Service, approached officials at other Blackfoot agricultural businesses in mid-October to find support for a new event, which she called Tractor Treat.

Agri-Service hosted the inaugural Tractor Treat from 4 to 6 p.m. on Oct. 30, with plans to rotate the event among the various participants into the future.

Local businesses including Bingham Cooperative, Spudnik Equipment, Agri-Source, Wada Farms, PRB Feed & Oil, Bingham County Implement and Mickelsen Construction sent representatives and decorated equipment to the Agri-Service parking lot, where they hosted games and handed out candy — or, in the case of Wada Farms, Easy-Baker



Photos by John O'Connell/Capital Press

Wada Farms hands out chips and microwaveable potatoes at Tractor Treat, hosted at Agri-Service in Blackfoot, Idaho, on Oct. 30. Local agriculture-related businesses sponsored the Halloween event for children.

potatoes.

Organizers awarded a prize to the child with the best agriculture-themed costume.

Morris said she was amazed by the interest from other businesses when she and Melonie Fisher, a regional parts manager with

Agri-Service, began knocking on doors.

"Some of us are competitors on any given day," Morris said. "It helps us all remember that we are all partners in this community."

Morris said Tractor Treat is modeled after trunk or treats, often hosted by



Children line up for candy by the Blackfoot John Deere dealer's display for Tractor Treat, hosted Oct. 30 at Agri-Service in Blackfoot. The display features a "smushed" dummy.

churches and involving parking cars in a lot to dispense candy in a safe environment.

Tish Dahman, executive director of the Greater Blackfoot Area Chamber of Commerce, helped set up signs to promote the event.

"The Blackfoot merchants haven't been active in putting together a Halloween event for children. That's been left to the various churches and schools," Dahman said. "To see our agricultural businesses step up to fill that void — to see them work together — is really exciting."

Dahmen said the unique concept for the Halloween event also speaks to the importance of agriculture in the local economy.

"It celebrates the identity of the Blackfoot community because we're an agricultural-based community," Dahmen said. "It celebrates our lifestyle and our culture."

Though the focus is on giving back to the community, Agri-Service Blackfoot store manager Rob Fisher said Tractor Treat also presents a chance to show off the store to those who may have missed an open house

in July. Fisher said Agri-Service opened its 12th location in a trailer in Blackfoot last October and finished a permanent facility this summer.

For Tractor Treat, Agri-Service put a funny face on a combine and converted a parts truck into a witch's hat, utilized for a ring-toss game.

Travis Sessions, manager of Bingham County Implement, a John Deere dealer, sent a utility tractor and a "smushed" dummy beneath a loader. He and his sales associate chose American Gothic-themed costumes, and they brought brochures on their equipment in case any visitors had questions.

"Even though we're competitors, we're working hand-in-hand," Sessions said. "This population really appreciates community support, and the more you can show, the better."

Tyler Harker, petroleum manager at Bingham Co-op, helped transform a company trailer into a massive spider hanging over hay bales and dry-ice fog.

"A lot of times, we miss these opportunities to network, and work together and socialize," Harker said.



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Corn is harvested in a field near Wilder, Idaho, on Oct. 6. According to USDA estimates, cropland rental expenses increased in Idaho in 2015 even though commodity prices declined.

Average cropland rental expense in Idaho increased this year

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Cropland rental expenses increased almost 5 percent in Idaho this year, despite declining commodity prices. But Gem State farmers don't expect to see a similar increase in 2016.

Cash rent expense for all cropland in Idaho averaged \$158 an acre in 2015, up \$7 an acre compared with 2014, according to estimates by USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Most ag land rental contracts are signed in September or October prior to the next season, said Shelley farmer Stan Searle.

"Most of the ground was all rented by the time everybody realized where things were headed," he said.

When those contracts for 2015 were signed last year, "people were not expecting commodity prices to be as low as they are right now," said University of Idaho Agricultural Economist Garth Taylor. "People were expecting a lot better commodity prices than what they're getting."

According to NASS, the average rental expense for irrigated ag land in Idaho is estimated at \$205 for 2015, up \$8 an acre over 2014. Rental expense for non-irrigated cropland was \$65 an acre, up \$4 compared with 2014.

Searle said those estimates appear reasonable.

"It's pretty close," he said. "There is ground a lot higher than that, but there is also ground that is quite a bit lower than that."

Ag land with a pivot irrigation system and good water rights can go for \$325-\$350 an acre if potatoes are being grown there, he said, but rental prices for some other crops grown on less favorable land can be significantly less than that.

Pasture cash rent expense in Idaho was estimated at \$12 an acre, the same as 2014.

According to NASS, the average cash rent expense for all cropland in Idaho averaged \$139 in 2013 and jumped to \$151 in 2014.

Another factor in the higher average cropland rental expense this year is that many contracts are for multiple years and some were signed when commodity prices were high, Searle said. If those contracts were renewed today, he added, it could be another story.

Sen. Jim Patrick, a Republican farmer from Twin Falls, agreed with that assessment.

"I certainly can't see them being up next year," he said. "It will be kind of a shock how quickly (commodity prices) fell and that will affect us next year for sure."

According to NASS, the average rental expense for irrigated cropland in Ida-

ho increased from \$177 an acre in 2013 to \$197 an acre in 2014, while the average rental expense for non-irrigated cropland rose from \$56 an acre in 2013 to \$61 an acre in 2014.

Water agreement opens private recharge opportunity

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

ABERDEEN, Idaho — The first canal companies to apply for private aquifer recharge water rights within the Eastern Snake Plain hope to capitalize on a recent agreement between the system's well irrigators and the Surface Water Coalition.

In the past year, Blackfoot-based People's Canal Co. and Shelley-based Snake River Valley Irrigation District were both awarded private aquifer recharge water rights, capped at 10,000 acre-feet.

Aberdeen-Springfield Canal Co. has a private recharge application pending and has sought Idaho Department of Water Resources approval to recharge above the standard cap.

The initial private recharge rights all have 2013 priority dates, junior to the state's 1980 recharge right.

The Surface Water Coalition made its water call about a decade ago, concerned about declining spring flows into the Snake River caused by well use. Conditions of a terms sheet the parties approved this summer require well users to reduce their consumption by 11 percent per year on average, among



John O'Connell/Capital Press

The Aberdeen-Springfield Canal flows through Aberdeen, Idaho. The canal company has applied for its own aquifer recharge water right, which it hopes to use both to help the state meet its recharge goals and to ease the burden of a mandatory reduction in consumptive use for groundwater districts who have entered an agreement with the Surface Water Coalition.

other measures, to reverse the aquifer declines.

Aberdeen-Springfield General Manager Steve Howser envisions receiving payments from groundwater districts, which would then apply his private recharge efforts toward their mandatory consumption reductions.

"That is an opportunity to make money that wasn't there a year ago," Howser said.

He said the water right's primary purpose will be enabling the company to recharge a greater volume for the state, which has committed to recharging 240,000 acre-feet per year for aquifer stabilization. Howser hopes the state will pay wheeling

fees to offset his company's expenses for allowing recharge water to seep into the aquifer through his unlined system and an adjacent spillway, and perhaps a little extra for the use of its private recharge right.

"I'd like to be able to recharge 30,000 to 40,000 acre-feet of the state's water, plus 30,000 to 40,000 acre-feet of our own water," Howser said.

Aberdeen-Springfield has already recharged 8,200 acre-feet this fall from the water district's rental pool to apply toward reduction requirements of the Bingham, Bonneville-Jefferson and Jefferson-Clark groundwater districts.

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