

# Idaho approves plan calling for ag land acquisition

By **JOHN O'CONNELL**  
Capital Press

BOISE — The State Board of Land Commissioners has approved a plan that's drawn criticism from some agricultural groups, suggesting that purchasing forest and farm land could be a good investment for the state.

Idaho Department of Lands Director Tom Schultz said his agency is already in discussions with Potlatch Corp. about purchasing a 2,000-acre parcel of timber land.

The board's consultant, Callan Associates, released a draft of its Strategic Reinvestment

Plan on March 15, advising agricultural land would be a good investment for the department, assuming it could generate at least a 4.5 percent rate of return, and timber would also be worth considering, if the rate of return were at least 3.5 percent.

Some agricultural groups submitted public comments on the draft plan, concerned about the potential for the state to compete with farmers and ranchers for land acquisitions and rentals, and that too much of the state's land is already in public control.

Following the board's 5-0 vote to implement the draft, Schultz explained his agency

will evaluate land purchases but may also opt to put revenue in its Permanent Fund, where it would be invested in stocks and bonds.

IDL, which has a mandate to maximize profits from its assets, began selling cottage lots it owns along Priest Lake and Payette Lake in 2007, investing revenue generated in commercial property. In April, Callan advised IDL that owning commercial property was a poor strategic fit, leading to the department's decision to sell about \$30 million in Boise-area commercial properties.

IDL expects to generate about \$160 million by the end of

Fiscal Year 2020 through both sales of commercial property and cottage lots.

Schultz said IDL met with the commissions of eight counties where land purchases are likely to occur and agricultural groups including Idaho Farm Bureau Federation, Idaho Cattle Association and Idaho Wool Growers. He said most of the public feedback was positive, though the agricultural groups had concerns. Farm Bureau submitted a letter in opposition to the plan.

"At this point, we're still analyzing what the decision may mean but we're hopeful it

means they'll cautiously move forward and not start buying, buying," said Farm Bureau spokesman Russ Hendricks.

Hendricks said 2.3 million acres are already off the tax roles due to state ownership, competition with agricultural interests would be no less of a problem than competition with commercial owners and the state faces many hurdles in terms of managing and disposing of property that could be avoided through investing in financial markets.

Schultz said his agency already employs foresters and

range managers — and owns 16,000 acres of farm land for lease — and the report suggests forest and agricultural property would be a better fit for its portfolio than commercial and residential land.

Schultz said the board will likely focus on purchases of forest land, and would seek to avoid buying highly demanded irrigated land in Southern Idaho in favor of dryland farms in Northern Idaho. He said the board would also have to go through a lengthy process, taking more than a year and involving public comment, to purchase land.

## Researchers test almonds as potential crop in Idaho

By **SEAN ELLIS**  
Capital Press

PARMA, Idaho — Researchers have planted an almond orchard trial in response to a large number of inquiries from commercial growers who want to know if that crop can grow well here.

Essie Fallahi, who heads the University of Idaho's pomology program at the Parma research center, said he has received a lot of calls about almonds from commercial growers in California as well as other states and even Canada.

Almond trees have been grown at the Parma research center in Southwestern Idaho in the past but this is the first time the station has a full almond orchard trial.

Researchers know almonds can be grown in Idaho but the increased interest from commercial growers warrants a full-blown trial to conduct more in-depth research, Fallahi said.

"There is a huge amount of interest (so) we decided to have a more comprehensive test," he said.

Researchers will study several aspects involved with growing almonds but at the top of their list will be finding cold-hardy varieties that can withstand Idaho's winters, which are much colder than California's.



Courtesy of Essie Fallahi

Almonds grow on a tree at University of Idaho's Parma research station in this photo. Researchers have planted a new almond orchard trial in response to an increasing number of calls from commercial growers in other states who want to know if the crop can grow well in Idaho.

"We have a tendency to have late spring frosts and early fall frosts and we have to see what kind of an effect that is going to have on the almonds," said Tom Elias, a research assistant at the Parma station. "It's going to be our only problem growing almonds here that I can foresee."

The one-acre almond orchard trial was planted this year and includes 16 varieties obtained from nurseries in California.

"What we're doing now is a trial with multiple different kinds of almonds to ... get that research done so growers will know what to plant up here and

how to do it," Elias said.

Interest in the possibility of growing almonds in southern Idaho has soared since California's most recent drought began, he said.

"We've had some almond growers ... who are very, very interested in coming up here," he said. "In the next three to five years, I think you're going to see some big almond orchards in Idaho. It's something that's coming."

Elias said having commercial almond orchards in Idaho would be good news for Idaho beekeepers. Many of them travel to California to pollinate the almond crop.

## Relentless winds cause headaches for growers in Treasure Valley

By **SEAN ELLIS**  
Capital Press

NAMPA, Idaho — Persistent winds for more than a month have created headaches for Treasure Valley growers in Idaho and Oregon, making it a struggle for them to spray their crops and keep the ground wet.

"The stinking wind blows every day," said Nyssa, Ore., grower Paul Skeen, who said the winds have resulted in poor onion stands in some fields.

The wind also takes the wax off onions, which can be injured if they are sprayed before the wax builds back up, he said.

The wind is also creating problems in other crops, including sugar beets, corn and alfalfa, because farmers are struggling to find windows to spray.

"We always have wind in the spring but this year it just seems like it's been non-stop for a month," said Nampa farmer Kevin Tuckness. "We haven't been able to spray very much because the wind's been blowing

non-stop."

Richard Durrant, owner of Big D Ranch, which grows 1,100 acres of sugar beets, corn, wheat, beans and alfalfa near Meridian, Idaho, said he had to re-plant some sugar beets this year because the wind dried the soil out before there was water in the canals.

Trying to keep the ground wet has been a real challenge this year because of the wind, said Neil Durrant, Richard Durrant's son.

"You couldn't keep the ground wet enough," he said. "It seemed like every time you would get it wet, the wind came and dried it all out again."

The Big D operation wasn't able to get its alfalfa sprayed this year and that crop has a lot of bug damage as a result, Richard Durrant said.

The farm's biggest concern right now is trying to get its sugar beets and corn sprayed.

"I think we'll suffer some on yields if we can't get in and spray soon," said Neil Durrant. "This year has been a lot worse than any year I

can recount. You can't spray when the wind is blowing 15 to 20 mph."

Tuckness said the wind has made a lot of sugar beet fields in the area uneven.

"You have stuff that's 4 inches and stuff that's just coming up," he said. "It dried out portions of the field so you have stuff that germinated and came up and other spots of the field where it's dry (and) we had to water everything up."

Some pre-emergent chemicals that growers were able to spray aren't having their normal effect because of how dry the soil is, Tuckness said.

Bill Buhrig, an Oregon State University Extension cropping systems agent in Ontario, said the wind has made it a challenge to apply some critical timing sprays.

He said it's been a struggle for many farmers in the area, including himself, to spray their alfalfa fields for weevils this year.

If weevil spraying is pushed back a week, "That's one more week that they've had the opportunity to damage your crop," he said.

## Listeria recall creates frozen vegetable industry conundrum

Pathogen is common but now more likely to be discovered

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**  
Capital Press

After numerous frozen vegetable brands were recalled for possible contamination with pathogenic listeria, attorney Bill Marler's phone has been ringing "off the hook."

Most of the callers are complaining of gastrointestinal ailments after receiving "robo-calls" from grocers informing consumers that the food they bought had been recalled, said Marler, whose Seattle practice focuses on foodborne illness outbreaks.

Marler said the callers generally aren't the type of clients he'd represent — the link between their illnesses and the recalled product is too tenuous — but he nonetheless sees the "huge reaction" as an ominous sign for the frozen vegetable industry.

"I can't imagine that it's not having an impact on sales," he said.

Though the recent frozen vegetable recalls are associated with only eight illnesses, experts say the incident highlights a conundrum for food processors.

Listeria is a common microbe in the environment that rarely causes serious problems for healthy people, but genetic testing can connect food products with outbreaks that probably would have gone unrecognized in the past, experts say.

For that reason, the pathogen is taking on new significance for processors.

Contaminated foods can now be matched with illnesses that



AP Photo file

A microbiologist pulls listeria bacteria from a tube to be tested for its DNA fingerprinting in a foodborne disease outbreak lab at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta in this 2013 photo.

are entered much earlier into a database maintained by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The current outbreak, for example, was found to extend back to September 2013.

"In a sense, it's like a hand reaching out of the grave to grab the producer," said Marler. "It puts a lot of pressure and burden on the producer."

There's also the matter of negative consumer perception, which may be amplified by the multitude of recalled products.

Federal authorities have identified CRF Frozen Foods of Pasco, Wash., as a likely source of the disease outbreak, but the recall has extended to more than 350 individual products made by the company under 42 separate brand names.

Several other food processors, including ConAgra, Twin City Foods, Stahlbush Island Farms, Pictsweet and NORPAC, have since initiated their own recalls of products that may contain vegetables supplied by CRF Frozen Foods.

"There are relatively few frozen vegetable processors but many, many brand names," said Charles Breen, a consultant and

retired district director of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

For food processors and the farmers who supply them, the risk is that shoppers will react to the recalls by avoiding frozen vegetables.

During past recalls, the initial drop in sales was caused by retailers pulling products from shelves, but this phenomenon was short-lived, said Carlos Arnade, an agricultural economist with USDA.

Recalls didn't have much short-term impact on consumer behavior, but the sales decrease became noticeable when awareness of the problem became widespread, he said.

"Stores react quickly and bounce back quickly. Consumers react slowly and bounce back extremely slowly," Arnade said.

When spinach contaminated with E. coli caused an outbreak in 2006, Arnade and other researchers found that consumers reacted by switching to related products, such as bagged lettuce.

However, it's tough to draw conclusions for frozen vegetables from that study.

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