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John O'Connell/Capital Press

Dead jack rabbits are strewn about the base of haystacks near Pingree, Idaho. The hay farmer said he's had to patrol for them throughout the night for several weeks this winter to protect his hay, shooting hundreds of the pests.

East Idaho hay farmers lose sleep over jackrabbits

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

PINGREE, Idaho — Eastern Idaho hay farmer Dewey Stander has enlisted employees and friends to patrol his haystacks from dusk until dawn, shooting at the hoards of hungry jackrabbits that attack during the night.

State wildlife officials say jackrabbit population cycles peak every decade or so, and an excessive regional population this season has been coupled with dense snow cover restricting their access to forage. When left unchecked, jackrabbits chew through the bases of the hay stacks, causing some to tip over or spill when the twine is severed, making bales difficult to load. Damage can add up to thousands of dollars.

Stander has spent more than \$3,500 on ammunition to ward off the long-eared pests. He's maintained a constant presence in his stack yards through the nights for more than five weeks. But he said plenty of friends were eager to take on the assignment, and their vigilance has helped keep the damage to a minimum.

After a few days of shooting, Stander said the rabbits became wise to the sound of approaching trucks.

"You'd pull in there and there'd be thousands of rabbits," Stander said. "You couldn't see the ground for all of the rabbits leaving."

Pingree-area grower Doug Finicle said he's purchased 40 boxes of shotgun shells for jackrabbit control and has

only a few shells remaining. Still, he estimates he's lost about 3 percent of his hay, though the greater burden is the labor involved re-tying severed bale twine.

"When they were at their worst, we were shooting them four times per night," Finicle said.

Finicle also had trouble with jackrabbits last year, though this year's pressure has been far greater.

Jason Beck, regional landowner and sportsman coordinator with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, said some growers who have accepted department funding to fence hay stacks from deer and elk have also asked the department to provide mesh for the bases of stacks for jackrabbit protection. He said the department has also aided USDA Wildlife Services in responding to problems at some area farms.

Todd Sullivan, district supervisor with Wildlife Services, said jackrabbits are classified as "vertebrate pests," like voles and coyotes. In the 1980s, Sullivan recalled communities within Idaho's Eastern Snake Plain would come together to help farmers with "bunny bashes," rounding them up and striking them with bats. Though the methods of the past wouldn't be condoned today, Sullivan said his office has provided growers relief from jackrabbits this season. Wildlife Services provides growers zinc phosphide poison and will aid in shooting jackrabbits.

Snowpack in most SW Idaho basins well above average

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Snowpack levels in southwestern Idaho are well above normal in many areas and most irrigators in the region can expect a good water year in 2017.

"It looks like we're going to have a real good season," said Tim Page, manager of the Boise Project Board of Control, which provides irrigation water to 167,000 acres and five irrigation districts in southwestern Idaho.

Last year was a normal water year and "we're well above what we were last year" at this time, Page said. Snowpack in the Boise River basin is 144 percent of average, which means that even if the basin receives no more snow the rest of the winter,

the basin would still finish with 114 percent of normal snowpack.

Because of flood control releases, 6,600 cubic feet per second of water is being released from Lucky Peak Reservoir, one of the Boise River system's three reservoirs that provide water to more than 300,000 acres of irrigated land.

At this time last year, 1,158 cubic feet per second of water was coming out of Lucky Peak, Page said, and two years ago that number was 459.

As long as the plentiful snow in the basin doesn't melt too quickly, it should be a good water year for the Pioneer Irrigation District's 5,800 patrons, said Pioneer manager Mark Zirschky.

Idaho lawmakers could soon be asked to change law on hemp

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — The idea of making it legal to grow industrial hemp in Idaho, at least for research purposes, has been brought up several times during the 2017 Idaho Legislature.

A bill that would allow that could be introduced during the 2018 Idaho legislative session.

Rep. Dorothy Moon, R-Stanley, plans to craft a bill that would change Idaho law to allow industrial hemp to be grown in the state for research.

Moon said she has been contacted by a lot of her constituents, including farmers, who are interested in growing hemp.

"There are a lot of people who want to grow it," she said. "I'm optimistic; I think it's going to happen."

Moon plans to discuss the idea with farm groups after this year's session ends and then craft a comprehensive bill that she hopes to introduce in 2018.

"I really want some thoughtful legislation on this," she said.

Mark Frei, an Idaho County commissioner and farmer who grows 3,000 acres of wheat, barley, canola and lentils, recently briefed Food Producers of Idaho members on the



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Erik Nelson speaks with Rep. Caroline Troy, R-Genesee, following Nelson's presentation on industrial hemp during the House Agricultural Affairs Committee's Feb. 6 meeting. Idaho lawmakers could soon be asked to change state law to allow industrial hemp to be grown in Idaho.

opportunities industrial hemp offers.

"I think industrial hemp should be legal in Idaho," he said. "I'm here to ask you for your endorsement of that idea."

With depressed wheat and corn prices, "there is a real need to get some acres out of wheat and corn," Frei said. "I do think it's an alternative crop we should look into."

During a separate presentation, Boise resident Erik Nelson talked to lawmakers about how Idaho farmers could benefit from growing industrial hemp and how it differs from marijuana.

The 2014 Farm Bill allows state departments of agriculture and universities to grow

industrial hemp under a pilot program for research.

To do that, though, state law must define industrial hemp as distinct from marijuana, which Idaho law does not do.

Thirty-two states have done that and 28 have hemp crops, while seven states have licensed farmers to grow hemp, Nelson said.

The U.S. imports more than \$500 million worth of hemp products annually, he said, and industrial hemp is used in more than 25,000 products.

"I can stand up here for an hour and not even scratch the surface of what you can do with hemp," Nelson told lawmakers.

He said industrial hemp is a low-maintenance crop and

the equipment used to harvest it is similar to the equipment used for corn and soybeans.

One acre of hemp can yield 700 pounds of seed, 22 gallons of oil and 5,300 pounds of straw, Nelson said.

"How do you like that as a crop?" he asked members of the House Agricultural Affairs Committee, which is dominated by farmers and ranchers. "I think this is an unparalleled economic opportunity for Idaho's farmers..."

Frei said a major education campaign needs to occur before legislators are asked to change state law regarding hemp.

"There is a bigger ground game that has to happen before that," he said.

Monsanto starting sage grouse research at corporate ranch

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

SODA SPRINGS, Idaho — Monsanto officials say they'll use a large corporate ranch in a phosphate-rich area of Caribou County to research sage grouse habitat restoration on land used for agricultural activities.

Monsanto has hired a researcher involved in sage grouse work and plans to collaborate with university researchers on projects at the ranch, intended to help mitigate for the company's planned Caldwell Canyon Mine.

The mine is proposed within public land classified as general sage grouse habitat under the Bureau of Land Management's new land-use plan, though it shouldn't affect any active leks, which are sensitive areas where sage grouse perform elaborate mating rituals.

The company will seek to improve about 320 acres of sage grouse habitat on the ranch, where sage brush and other key native plants have been removed for cattle grazing. The research should also be of interest to other companies and entities seeking to rehabilitate land for sage grouse,



Courtesy of Monsanto

As part of planned research at Monsanto's Caribou County ranch to benefit sage grouse, a riparian area in the foreground will be connected with grazing land on the hillside, where the company plans to implement habitat improvements. The project will help the company mitigate for its planned Caldwell Canyon Mine.

said Randy Vranes, mineral operations business unit lead for Monsanto's Soda Springs plant.

Monsanto intends to conduct additional research on reclaiming mining land to benefit sage grouse once operations cease in the early 2020s at its current Blackfoot Bridge Mine, said Vranes, who served on a task force Idaho Gov. Butch Otter created to draft the state's suggestions for sage grouse management.

Vranes said studies thus far have mostly focused on rehabilitating sage grouse habitat following wildfires, but little work has been done to assess how to restore land cleared for farming or grazing.

"A lot of these areas have been agriculturally changed — taken out of sage brush," Vranes said. "We have a section of our ranch that falls into that, and we're going to do a study to see if there's a way to bring sage brush back in those areas."

Vranes said researchers may also work to optimize mixtures of beneficial forbs and grasses to grow beneath the sage brush, and to establish habitat corridors to connect sage brush and riparian areas.

Vranes said Monsanto consulted with conservation organizations to develop its plans. The Greater Yellowstone Coalition, for example, encouraged Monsanto to focus

on improving habitat for wildlife in general, and not just for sage grouse.

"While we haven't seen the final details, we're encouraged by these steps and look forward to everyone doing more to help restore wildlife habitat across Idaho," said John Robison, public lands director with the Idaho Conservation League, who served on the task force with Vranes and has toured Monsanto's ranch.

Monsanto has created a pamphlet to distribute at public meetings on Caldwell Canyon Mine highlighting its sage grouse research, and how the company has sought to avoid impacts on sage grouse habitat in its mining plan.

Rather than building a haul road through sage grouse habitat connecting the new mine with Blackfoot Bridge, about 7 miles to the west, Monsanto has agreed to ship phosphate ore by rail from Agrium's nearby mine, which will be more costly, Vranes said.

Monsanto also plans to backfill Agrium's open pit with waste rock from Caldwell Canyon rather than building an external overburden pile, thereby minimizing water contamination.

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