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## Idaho

# Idaho ag department gets 11 percent budget hike

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

BOISE — The Idaho State Department of Agriculture's total budget of \$44.9 million for fiscal year 2018 will be an increase of 11 percent, or \$4.9 million, over the current fiscal year.

But the revenue the department receives from dedicated funds, which are fees people pay for services, will actually decrease 1.4 percent to \$25.7 million.

That means farmers and ranchers and others in the ag industry who utilize ISDA services face no significant fee increases in the new fiscal year, which begins July 1.

Most of the increase to the overall budget — \$4.1 million — will go to the department's invasive species program to buttress efforts to prevent



Sean Ellis/Capital Press File

Dry beans are harvested in a field near Nampa, Idaho, last September. Idaho lawmakers have agreed to increase the Idaho State Department of Agriculture's fiscal year 2018 budget 11 percent to \$44.9 million.

quagga mussels from invading Idaho waterways.

The budget includes an additional \$3.1 million in

general fund revenue and \$1 million in expected federal funding to open three new watercraft inspection stations

and run a night-time inspection operation.

Lawmakers have made it a priority to keep quagga mussels, a freshwater invasive species that can wreak havoc in water ecosystems, from reaching Idaho.

The ISDA got everything it asked for in its 2018 budget request.

"This budget, with its approved enhancement requests, shows confidence in the ISDA continuing to fulfill our mission to serve agriculture and all of Idaho," ISDA Director Celia Gould told Capital Press in an email.

Lawmakers also approved:

- \$80,000 for an additional organic inspection position to handle rapid growth in ISDA's organic certification program.
- Spending authority for a \$447,000 federal Food Safety Modernization Act grant to

help determine the scope of produce grown in Idaho that will be covered by the act's produce safety rule, as well as provide outreach, education and technical assistance to affected producers.

- An additional \$160,000 to cover costs of the department's ongoing methyl bromide mitigation efforts relating to fields in Eastern Idaho treated with the powerful fumigant under a federal pale cyst nematode eradication program.

- \$99,000 for an additional rangeland management specialist.

- \$87,700 for a full-time information technology network security analyst to help ensure the information the department has on thousands of farmers and ranchers is secure.

"We hold a lot of sensitive information here and we need to protect it," said ISDA Chief

of Operations Chanel Tewart.

Largely as a result of the increased money for the invasive species program, ISDA's general fund revenue in fiscal 2018 will increase 40 percent to \$11.9 million.

Revenue from federal funding will increase 24.6 percent to \$7.4 million, also largely from the expected \$1 million federal quagga mussels grant.

ISDA's total \$44.9 million fiscal 2018 budget is still below the department's pre-recession 2008 budget of \$46 million.

Gould pointed out to lawmakers that most of the department's revenue comes from dedicated funds.

"The majority of ISDA's services are paid for by those using them and I think that's a great reflection of the financial health of the agency," she said.

## UI Extension experts see gains in local forage market

By JOHN O'CONNELL  
Capital Press

BLACKFOOT, Idaho — A severe winter has strengthened regional demand for alfalfa, but grower returns are still hovering around the cost of production, according to University of Idaho Extension experts.

Extension educator Reed Findlay, who oversees forage and horticulture in Bannock and Bingham counties, said the average Idaho price for a ton of alfalfa in 2016 was \$114. Findlay predicts 2017 Idaho alfalfa prices will average \$144 per ton.

"We're seeing a lot better prices than we saw around Christmas time," Findlay told hay growers March 16 during a UI forage school in Blackfoot. "There is movement in the hay markets, and they are better than we thought they'd be."

However, Findlay said large hay inventories remain, and a strong dollar has constrained alfalfa exports. Findlay believes recent flooding throughout Southern and Eastern Idaho will cut into hay yields and improve the local supply outlook. He anticipates the cool, moist conditions will also lead to problems with phytophthora root rot.

"This may be a lower production year because of those two factors," Findlay said. "In



John O'Connell/Capital Press

University of Idaho Extension economist Ben Eborn presents his report on the cost of producing alfalfa in Idaho during a forage school March 16 in Blackfoot.

the next few weeks, we'll find out more of what's going on in the alfalfa fields."

Blackfoot grower Dave Bingham said muddy field conditions have made it tough to access stacks and deliver hay, further boosting local demand. Lately, Bingham said local straw demand has been on the rise, as muddy conditions have increased the need for bedding during calving season.

Also during the forage school, UI Extension economist Ben Eborn publicized results of his Idaho alfalfa production cost study. Eborn estimated the average southeast Idaho grower spent \$135 per ton to raise hay in 2016, down \$2 from the previous year. Alfalfa growers in Magic Valley invested \$146 per ton, down

by a dollar.

His model farm in southeast Idaho had 1,250 acres of land and yielded 6 tons of alfalfa per acre. His Magic Valley model farm included 2,200 acres, producing 7 tons of alfalfa per acre.

Eborn attributes the slight decline in production costs largely to a 15 to 30 percent drop in fertilizer prices, a 10 to 20 percent drop in chemical prices and an 8 to 9 percent drop in fuel and repairs for machinery.

Eborn said fuel prices should remain fairly steady throughout 2017, and fertilizer market experts anticipate further price declines of 10 to 15 percent. Labor and irrigation costs should continue to rise, however.

He said his report is available at [www.uidaho.edu/cals/idaho-agbiz](http://www.uidaho.edu/cals/idaho-agbiz) as a tool for growers to assess their own progress.

"If you don't know what your actual costs of production are then how do you know if you're heading in the right direction with your cost structure?" Eborn said.

Eborn advises growers who must make cuts to start with their largest expenditures first, such as fertilizer and equipment. Growers who don't shop around for fertilizer often miss out on the best prices, he said.



Courtesy of James Hoff

A farmer responds to the Henry's Creek Fire in Bonneville County, Idaho, late last summer. The farmers and ranchers have formed a new rural fire protection association to better coordinate their efforts with those of professional firefighters.

## Bonneville County farmers, ranchers form fire association

By JOHN O'CONNELL  
Capital Press

IDAHO FALLS — For as long as Bob Hoff has farmed, the 75-year-old has fought wildfires in the foothills of Bonneville County.

This summer, however, he and more than 30 other area farmers and ranchers will do it as part of the state's ninth rural fire protective association. They will receive training, protective gear and radios to coordinate their efforts with professional firefighters.

The program has been offered through the Idaho Department of Public Lands since 2012, providing training and resources to rural residents who are often the first to respond when wildfires are sparked.

"The range fires we feel are best fought with a tractor and a disc," Hoff said. "We've felt frustrated because we've had no communication with other firefighters up there over the years."

The new association had its first training, conducted by Bureau of Land Management officials, on Feb. 25. The farmer-firefighters say the training

has opened their eyes to the importance of first evaluating a fire for safety considerations, rather than jumping in immediately. They're awaiting approval of nonprofit status.

Hoff said fires surface almost every year in his rural area. Last summer, however, Bonneville County experienced an especially devastating arson-caused blaze. The Henry's Creek Fire scorched nearly 60,000 acres, fueled by strong winds and dry vegetation, and local farmers were credited with digging fire breaks that kept the flames away from new development.

Hoff's son, Idaho Potato Commissioner James Hoff, said some sheriff's deputies, based on safety concerns, were hesitant to allow farmers access to the Henry's Creek Fire. Heading forward, police dispatchers will notify the farmers when fires are reported and solicit their help.

"North and east of my place, the foothills are loaded with homes," James Hoff said. "I've been around those homes with my tractor and disc to keep fire from getting into them."

James Hoff said firefighting is hard on his personal equipment — he incurred \$12,000 in damage to a tractor fighting one fire — and the association will be eligible for grants to acquire equipment specifically for fire containment.

Hoff said the association will cover the eastern two-thirds of rural Bonneville County, as well as a portion of the western area, and possibly the northern tip of Bingham County. Bonneville County Commissioner Dave Radford, who farmers say has been instrumental in setting up the association, said it should relieve some of the burden on the sheriff, who is tasked with heading rural fire responses.

"The communication gap we've had in the past can be bridged with this effort," Radford said.

Association members will pay dues to cover their liability insurance, but IDL will supply them with training materials, protective uniforms, hardhats, radios and portable fire shelters from a state fund, said Rick Finis, with IDL's Fire Management Bureau.

## Otter appeals dismissal of sage grouse lawsuit

By KEITH RIDLER  
Associated Press

BOISE — Idaho Gov. Butch Otter is appealing the dismissal of his sage grouse lawsuit against the federal government.

Otter late last week filed the notice appealing to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the

District of Columbia.

Otter sued in September 2015 after federal officials opted not to list sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act but announced federal land-use restrictions.

U.S. District Judge Emmet G. Sullivan dismissed the lawsuit in January. Sullivan didn't rule on the merits

of the claims but said Otter lacked standing because the state didn't prove it had been injured.

Otter has long complained that Idaho worked with federal agencies to come up with a sage grouse plan only to have Idaho's plan ignored.

The sage grouse is found in 11 Western states.

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