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Idaho

Treasure Valley farmers share guidance through soil health group

By **JOHN O'CONNELL**
Capital Press

MIDDLETON, Idaho — Tyson Meeks and his father, Emery, got the idea for Soil Keepers a couple of years ago, while attending a soil health symposium in Ontario, Ore.

The speakers who came from out of town were knowledgeable about the general subject matter, but weren't familiar with the local challenges, such as dry and alkaline soils and the prevalence of old-fashioned furrow irrigation, Meeks explained.

So Meeks and his father, both of Middleton, decided they'd organize their own forums, highlighting actual practices that have worked for area farmers and ranchers.

"Listening to some of the questions and comments from the audience, my dad picked up that there are a lot of efforts and ideas here in the valley that are more specific to our problems," Meeks said.

A retired local sheep rancher, Don Wilkinson, helped them organize the first meeting, which they hosted Oct.



Courtesy Don Wilkinson
Levi Gibson, left, and Deanne Vallad lead a discussion Oct. 13 in Fruitland, Idaho, during the first meeting of a new group of farmers called Soil Keepers. The group will meet again on Nov. 11.

13 at Farmers Mutual Telephone Co. in Fruitland. About 25 food producers attended the first meeting, and they're expecting a crowd of at least 50 when they meet again Nov. 11. Additional meetings will be hosted

every few months, featuring presentations by local volunteers on a designated topic. Anyone interested in the meetings may contact Meeks at soilkeepersgroup@gmail.com.

Meeks, who was among the presenters at the initial meeting, farmed conventionally until about eight years ago, when he decided to begin incorporating no-till farming and cover crops. Initially, his family had a hard time finding guidance, learning by adapting practices designed for the Midwest, and through trial and error.

"When we started looking at these ideas, we were stumped," Meeks said.

By next season, all of Meeks' fields will be no-till, and he's beginning to notice significant improvements in disease and pest pressure and soil water retention.

Deanne Vallad, who farms and ranches in Ontario, Ore., spoke about the practices she's implemented to cut her production costs in half in a single year, without

sacrificing productivity. Vallad has been planting cover crops that have enabled her to build soil organic matter while providing forage for her cattle and biofumigation of pests. Chemicals naturally released from her mixture of forage turnips and radishes, planted late in the season after she harvested triticale, helped her control a gopher problem, for example.

"I want my cows out there grazing more days than I'm feeding them," said Vallad, who now sells cover crop seed.

Middleton farmer and rancher Levi Gibson addressed the crowd about his use of forage corn to provide winter grazing for his cattle. Gibson direct seeded the corn into stubble after baling a mix of barley and forage peas for his cattle. Gibson likes that his cattle can still access forage corn in heavy snow.

"There's no reason we can't be profitable even in bad years if we share ideas and work together," Gibson said.

Idaho Land Board could vote on change to state grazing rate

By **SEAN ELLIS**
Capital Press

BOISE — The Idaho Land Board could decide as soon as Dec. 5 whether to establish a new grazing rate formula on state endowment lands.

An Idaho Department of Lands subcommittee and advisory group has been reviewing the methodology of the state's grazing rate formula, which hasn't changed since 1993.

Five alternatives are on the table, including one that would retain the state's current grazing rate formula, which resulted in a grazing rate of \$9.01 per animal unit month this year.

An AUM is the amount of forage needed to feed a cow and calf for a month.

Bureau will study feasibility of raising three Boise River dams

By **SEAN ELLIS**
Capital Press

BOISE — A proposed major study to determine the feasibility of storing more water on the Boise River system by raising three dams by several feet each is moving forward.

The Idaho Water Resource Board on Oct. 24 committed up to \$3 million toward the \$6 million U.S. Bureau of Reclamation study, which required a 50 percent non-federal match to proceed.

The bureau will look at the possibility of raising Anderson Ranch Dam by 6 feet, Arrowrock Dam by 10 feet and Lucky Peak Dam by 4 feet.

Combined, that would create an additional 60,000 acre-feet of storage capacity on the Boise River system, which can currently store just under 1 million acre-feet of water.

Southwestern Idaho irri-



U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation will conduct a \$6 million study to determine if it's feasible to raise Arrowrock Dam — shown in this aerial view — and two other dams on the Boise River system by several feet each. That would add 60,000 acre-feet of water storage capacity to the system.

gators have talked about the need for additional water storage capacity for quite awhile, said Roger Batt, executive director of the Treasure Valley Water Users Association, whose members represent 320,000 acres of irrigated land in the region.

River area office, told Capital Press that staff from his agency and the Idaho Department of Water Resources have done a lot of preliminary work on the idea.

"There are irrigators who are very interested in having something like this happen," he said. "It's a great position to be in now and I think we're all ready to roll up our sleeves and start working."

Though the IWRB voted 7-0 to authorize up to \$3 million toward the project, they also expressed concerns about committing that much money toward a study when there is no guarantee the dams will actually be raised.

The board also provided matching funds for a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers study that determined raising Arrowrock by up to 70 feet was the best option for solving water supply and flood risk issues on the Boise system. Doing that would have

added 100,000 acre-feet of storage capacity.

But the corps said the benefits of that project didn't match the \$1.2 billion cost — a requirement to move forward with construction — and the IWRB terminated that \$3.5 million study in January.

"We're really committed to doing these projects but we're also wondering, are we ever going to have success?" board chairman Roger Chase told Springer.

Chase told Capital Press later the board is "frustrated because we're spending hard-earned taxpayer dollars. The board is really concerned about these studies that just seem to go on."

But he said board members also realize the fast-growing Treasure Valley area will need additional water supplies in the future and the only place to get them from is the Boise River system.



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