



Bill Bitzenberg, left, chairman of the Twin Falls, Idaho, Soil and Water District, talks about planting corn into a cover crop with farmer Lance Griff. No-till farming using cover crops to improve soil tilth and retain moisture are among the many efforts supported by the district. Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

Districts bring conservation efforts **DOWN TO EARTH**

Soil and water districts, NRCS work with farmers and ranchers to benefit the land and streams

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

TWIN FALLS, Idaho — Third-generation farmer Lance Griff wanted to improve the soil health and conserve water on the 3,700 acres he farms with his father, Ron, on the notoriously water-short Salmon Tract in southern Twin Falls County. He believed planting cover crops and using no-till farming practices would help achieve those goals. His interest in them landed him at the Twin Falls Soil and Water Conservation District.

“They definitely provided support, and they provided expertise and were able to direct me to funding sources to try different projects,” he said.

Those contributions spurred his farm’s ongoing evolution toward sustainability. The practices are improving water infiltration and soil moisture and reducing erosion. In the process, he is using less fuel and labor.

From both soil health and economic perspectives, “we feel like it makes sense,” he said.

There’s a soil-health movement going on, and farmers need the resources and support that conservation districts provide, he said.

“They are definitely well-respected and viewed as useful,” he said.

A former board member of his local district, Griff had seen the results of district efforts — from improving soils and irrigation efficiency to repairing eroded stream banks. He also saw the value of hosting project demonstrations to educate farmers and a public that is becoming increasingly disconnected from agriculture, he said.

Conservation legacy

While soil conservation districts had their baptism of fire following the devastation of the 1930s Dust Bowl, the movement got its begin-

ning decades earlier. It was championed by Hugh Hammond Bennett, a young college graduate who went to work as a soil surveyor for USDA in 1905.

Now recognized as the “father of conservation,” Bennett spent 20 years trying to bring attention to the nation’s eroded soils and the need for conservation. Lawmakers finally started to listen in the late 1920s, and the Dust Bowl — a drought that led to massive dust storms and topsoil losses across a swath land reaching from Texas to Nebraska — fueled the movement.

The groundwork for the Dust Bowl was laid in the early 1900s when high demand for wheat, generous federal farm policies and a series of wet years caused a land boom in the Great Plains.

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Commission proposes rules for Oregon Ag Heritage Program

Seeking \$11 million at 2019 Legislature

By GEORGE PLAVERN
Capital Press

After four months of meetings, the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Commission has come up with a budget request for state lawmakers

to fund grants for farmland conservation, preservation and easements.

The 12-member commission was appointed in January to write administrative rules for the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program, established in House Bill 3249 which passed the Legislature in July 2017.

Commissioners are recommending \$10 million to run the program, administered by the Oregon Water-



Ellie McAdams

shed Enhancement Board. The program initially sought \$4.25 million, though at the time legislators did not allocate any funding.

OWEB is now seeking public comment on the proposal, with a pair of public meetings sched-

uled July 16 in Salem and July 17 in Burns.

Nellie McAdams, program coordinator, said the bulk of the money would go toward grants to help Oregon farmers and ranchers develop conservation plans for their property, establish conservation easements or move forward with succession planning to ensure the land remains in agricultural production.

Conserving farmland is essential, McAdams said, not only for the economy and rural communities, but for the environment as well.

“The commission has taken great efforts to integrate both conservation and agricultural outcomes and goals for each of the grant programs,” McAdams said. “This program goes

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Perdue pushes help for farmers hurt by trade war

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

SPOKANE — Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue says he’s pushing for government help for farmers hurt by the spreading trade war between the U.S. and other countries.

“The president says he won’t allow ag producers to bear the brunt of trade disputes. We are undergoing significant trade disruptions on corn

and soybeans. I believe if we are not able to resolve this — I’m laying down a marker that we need to resolve it by Labor Day or we need some sort of mitigation,” Perdue told agricultural and timber leaders hosted by U.S. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., for breakfast at the Spokane Club on July 20.

Perdue said any government help might be retroactive so cherries and other commodities that suffer losses

before Labor Day would be covered.

Potential market losses due to the trade war was the chief topic of discussion at the breakfast attended by Derek Sandison, director of the Washington State Department of Agriculture, who told Perdue that Washington has an \$11 billion annual farmgate value with 37 percent of “what we grow” shipped overseas.

“You will hear a lot about trade from every person because so much

of our product is exported,” said Glen Squires, CEO of the Washington Grain Commission.

“Our farmers grow wheat. Ninety percent of it is exported. Some of these relationships have been built over 60 years. Markets take a long time to develop, but they can be lost quickly because there are a lot of suppliers out there,” Squires said.

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