

MINUTES
SENATE AGRICULTURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

DATE: Tuesday, February 13, 2018

TIME: 8:00 A.M.

PLACE: Room WW53

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chairman Rice, Vice Chairman Den Hartog, Senators Patrick, Bayer, Guthrie, Thayn, Harris, Foreman, and Jordan

ABSENT/ EXCUSED: None

NOTE: The sign-in sheet, testimonies and other related materials will be retained with the minutes in the committee's office until the end of the session and will then be located on file with the minutes in the Legislative Services Library.

CONVENED: **Chairman Rice** called the meeting of the Agricultural Affairs Committee (Committee) to order at 8:00 a.m.

MINUTES APPROVAL: **Senator Thayn** moved to approve the Minutes of February 1, 2018. Seconded by **Vice Chairman Den Hartog**. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

INTRODUCE: **University of Idaho (UI) Public Policy Tour. Rick Waitley**, Agriculture Economics, Executive Director, Food Producers, introduced the UI students. **Mr. Waitley** advised the students are attending a four-day seminar on public policy and agency government. They also will interact with industry leaders.

PRESENTATION: Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission (ISWCC). Teri Murrison, Administrator, ISWCC, said Conservation the Idaho Way is locally led agricultural stewardship on private lands. It depends on voluntary actions concerning projects to improve water quality; restore streams, rivers, forest, range, croplands; and contribute to healthy soils. The program balances our economic health with that of our natural resources, and helps satisfy environmental laws and regulations.

ISWCC focuses on several core functions:

1. Serving conservation districts: providing financial and technical assistance;
2. Providing incentive-based and other conservation programs;
3. Educating about voluntary conservation.

ISWCC offers assistance in district plans and implements local projects. ISWCC works closely with their federal partner, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). ISWCC provides districts with financial and technical assistance based on the expertise and availability of staff. Districts receive about 50 percent of ISWCC field staff hours because of other program obligations.

A short video was played to help the Committee understand how projects develop and agencies seek ISWCC expertise. The video illustrated the restoration work that is underway for the City of Weiser and Weiser River. In early February 2017, after two months of severe winter weather, it warmed up in Weiser, Idaho and subsequent spring flooding occurred on farm fields and low lying areas around the City of Weiser. The flooding destroyed the Weiser River Soil Conservation District wetlands area, which was constructed to filter out sediment from an irrigation canal. This was a \$456,000 water quality project funded by the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Numerous levees were damaged or breached in a ten mile span of the river. After the flood waters subsided, ISWCC offered 200 hours of technical assistance

including drafting of engineering plans for repairs and handling permitting with multiple agencies. The levee was restored on both sides of the river and the river bank repairs were designed so the new levees would meet United States Army Corps of Engineers standards. ISWCC engineers managed to pay for the highest priority projects with Flood District Funds and Landowner Cost Share Funds; these funds allowed more than five areas to be repaired.

Ms. Murrison discussed some of the issues ISWCC faces in providing district support based on the expertise and availability of their staff. Because there are other program obligations, districts receive about 50 percent of ISWCC field staff hours, less than what they request. ISWCC continues to refine their technical assistance allocation process to deliver as much assistance as possible, but given ISWCCs constrained resources the most feasible solution to this issue might be for districts to write technical assistance into grant applications and take on new partners.

Ms. Murrison advised ISWCC is the State lead for the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). For a number of reasons, producers have been slow to enroll acreage in this program. The following are a few of those reasons:

- Annual payment rates do not keep pace with increasing cropland rental rates, spurred by high commodity prices;
- CREP's 15-year fixed annual rental rate had no allowance for inflation;
- Native grass seed is expensive.

To address these issues, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) increased rental rates to \$30 per acre for the 15-year contract term and ground water districts will offer annual incentives.

The Resource Conservation and Rangeland Development Program (RCRDP) was reviewed in August to determine what changes needed to be made in this program to attract more potential borrowers. In a collaborative effort with agency partners, they plan to bring rule changes before the Legislature to increase interest for future borrowers. During the first six months of fiscal year 2018, loan volume and interest in the program has rebounded significantly.

Vice Chairman Den Hartog asked if there is Statewide interest in a farmland preservation program. **Ms. Murrison** answered ISWCC currently does not support farmland preservation as one of their statutory roles; however, it would fit well with their conservation mission which is the preservation of agricultural lands. In particular, **Ms. Murrison** had conversations with different districts concerning the need in the Treasure Valley to make sure the heritage and ability to produce food and fiber continues into the future. **Ms. Murrison** indicated the Idaho State Department of Agriculture has spoken to groups concerning this issue.

Chairman Rice questioned the comments in Ms. Murrison's presentation which indicated not all of the Weiser River Project work has been completed. He asked Ms. Murrison if she could give the Committee information on the work that remains to be completed and the levee repairs. **Ms. Murrison** spoke to the issue of the replacement by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers limits replacement in certain areas of that project. Idaho's repair efforts were able to repair the river projects to higher standards than the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers standards for repair would be a minimum restoration and Idaho's interest is to make sure that the river system works for the landowners who use the river. **Chairman Rice** asked if the larger rocks used in the restoration are new to the Weiser River Levee Project. **Ms. Murrison** explained there is an escarpment that goes up from the river. At the top of the escarpment is a canal that conveys

water. The canal was severely eroded in the flooding. The large rock used on the cliff was to shore-up the canal erosion.

PRESENTATION: Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts (IASCD). Mike Sommerville, member of IASCD Board, stated IASCD is primarily responsible for leadership in locally led, non-regulatory conservation. IASCD works on environmental enhancement efforts, sustainability of agricultural production, and improvement in the natural resource base. IASCD conducts surveys and demonstration projects in response to exigency work. IASCD enters into district flood prevention measures establishing agreements and building partnerships with all conservation agencies. They support landowners one-on-one in improving soil health projects, such as cover crops, erosion, and flood control.

IASCD works with districts and landowners to reduce ground water pollution from agricultural lands by assisting them with the implementation of BMPs on private lands. Idaho is still \$100 million in need to address water quality issues in the State on agricultural, range, and dry land.

ADJOURNED: There being no further business, **Chairman Rice** adjourned the meeting at 8:42 a.m.

Senator Rice
Chair

Carol Deis
Secretary