

MINUTES
HOUSE AGRICULTURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

DATE: Tuesday, January 22, 2013

TIME: 1:30 P.M.

PLACE: Room EW42

MEMBERS: Chairman Andrus, Vice Chairman Boyle, Representatives Bolz, McMillan, Batt, Bell, Agidius, Dayley, Miller, Romrell, Stevenson, VanOrden, Pence, Erpelding.

**ABSENT/
EXCUSED:** None.

GUESTS: Candi Fitch, Executive Director of Idaho Apple Commission, Idaho Cherry Commission, Idaho-Oregon Fruit and Vegetable Association, Idaho-Eastern Oregon Onion Committee; Wally Butler, Range and Livestock Specialist, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation (IFBF); Jayson Ronk, Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry (IACI); Nate Fischer.

Chairman Andrus called the meeting to order at 1:30 p.m.

MOTION: **Rep. Erpelding** made a motion to approve the minutes of the January 16, 2013 meeting. **Motion carried by voice vote.**

Candi Fitch, Executive Director, Idaho Apple Commission, explained that all four organizations she represents operate out of one office in Parma, Idaho. She outlined the Commissioners and various national, regional, and local memberships that the Apple Commission is associated with. This year's crop was positive overall and prices were up from last year. The Apple Commission works on a small budget to promote awareness, primarily with local schools. Ms. Fitch spoke about grants from the University of Idaho, which facilitate research projects that are essential to stay competitive in the market. The Cool School Cafe grant helps schools receive points and rewards brand loyalty, in coordination with school chefs and nutritionists. The Apple Commission participated in the Buy Idaho Capitol show last year and the Farm to School Conference, which were successful. They also sent out mailings to other states and Idaho schools. Other activities include the Canyon County Fair, Ag Pavilion with Expo Idaho, Twin Falls County Fair, and St. Luke's Women's Fitness Celebration, at which they pass out thousands of boxes of Idaho apples. They also work with the Idaho Preferred and Farm to School Programs. The Apple Commission budgets for administrative expenses, promotional programs, research projects, and Ms. Fitch added that although grant money may be added into their budgets, these monies must be used in specific ways. They receive some federal money, which each state decides how to allocate. Ms. Fitch offered that success is difficult to measure, in meeting objectives with the grants. The Onion Committee has a 'fair' report every year that measures productivity on their promotions, education and research. The last three years have shown a positive impact on the dollars invested. She expressed enthusiasm about funding apple projects, keeping research viable, and making meaningful contributions to the combined Parma office.

Candi Fitch, Executive Director, Idaho Cherry Commission, presented information on the Cherry Commissioners and partnerships with Idaho Preferred, Northwest Cherry Growers, and Ag in the Classroom. She indicated that the weather, volume and quality of this last year's crop was good, although prices were not as high as last year. One Commissioner passed away recently and another appointment will be filled in this year's elections. The cherry budget stays about the same each year and is fortunate to share the office with the other commissions.

The Idaho-Oregon Fruit and Vegetable Association report was given by **Candi Fitch**, Executive Director. This year was the 50th anniversary of the Association. They deal primarily with matters relating to the shipment of fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables. Many of the same labor and transportation issues have remained the same, with the exception of newer food safety laws. They are fortunate to have a strong voice, in conjunction with numerous similar fruit and vegetable associations and coalitions. The ID-OR Fruit and Vegetable Association keeps current with research, which is vital for our area to stay relevant and survive in the global marketplace.

Ms. Fitch also presented information on the Idaho-Eastern Oregon Onion Committee, as their Executive Director. This region is one of the largest onion areas, generating a billion pounds of onions each year. Washington State is higher in acreage, but the Idaho-Eastern Oregon Onion Committee, also known as USA Onions, is higher in yield. The logo has changed and they currently have a promotion with Weber Grills. The Onion Committee employs a full time marketing director. There is also an export group and a research group. In response to questioning, Ms. Fitch explained that Vitalia onions from Georgia have a higher onion weight and value per hundred, based on their name recognition and size of their crop. The Idaho-Eastern Oregon region tends to be lower in value for onions, partly due to a large crop, and taking in the forces of supply and demand.

In response to questions regarding the number of orchards decreasing in Idaho and Utah, and if this area will be able to keep up with demand, **Ms. Fitch** said that although previous fruit and vegetable production levels had dropped locally, they have stayed the same in recent years. An example referenced was that of apple juice being imported from China in 1999, but local crops since then seem to have stabilized regarding production and pricing. Also, regulations may always be a factor, when commodities become more expensive to grow, but the Commissioners are not overly worried and remain optimistic about the future production and demand of local crops.

Idaho Farm Bureau's Range Management Update was provided by **Wally Butler**, Range and Livestock Specialist. He commented that during the Legislative session, he works on many endangered species issues. Throughout the rest of the year, he attends Farm Bureau meetings and spends the balance of his time on ATV or horseback, checking on ranchlands around the state. He is able to take pictures before and after grazing. He serves on the Sage Grouse Task Force and assists the BLM with environmental assessments, leading to the formulation of guidelines and helping to determine whether sage grouse may need to be listed as an endangered species. He noted that recovery efforts in riparian wetland areas are being studied and documented as to how they affect grazing patterns. Most agencies and ranchers listen to and comply with the suggested, progressive changes. Also, the Governor has requested funds to form local fire districts to help ranchers protect their own rural areas, since they know them best. Mr. Butler is involved with the Society for Ranch Management at the national level and will soon represent them as their President. They publish the premiere science journal for ranchland ecology, management, and applications. This Society includes ranchers, consultants, professors, and many more resources. They provide awareness of issues at the federal level, including a strong policy on feral horses and hogs.

Regarding the possibility of the sage grouse being listed as an endangered species, **Mr. Butler** answered that the primary threats to the sage grouse are the loss of habitat by wildfire and invasive plant species, such as cheat grass, juniper and medusa head. He stated that urban expansion, energy development, conversion to farming lands, predators, and improper grazing are secondary threats in most areas. Grazing can be regulated, invasive plants can be removed, and human-caused fires can be reduced, but there is still great concern for potential listing, despite these efforts. With respect to predators, Mr. Butler said that collared animals and tracking are helpful. They have found that some sage grouse migrate to the desert, where nesting under brush is key. The sage grouse babies live on insects and small soft plants in the spring.

Concerning the use of controlled grazing and firebricks as preventative measures, **Mr. Butler** responded that the BLM has initiated pilot projects of this nature, involving more intensive winter grazing on annual grasses, with attention to controlling livestock numbers and timing to get them off the land when perennials begin to grow in the spring time, but some avenues are limited by litigation. He stated that it would be nearly impossible to correct the entire cheat grass problem, except on roadsides and with targeted grazing.

Following the mention of cheat grass that emerges after a fire, **Mr. Butler** explained that the BLM has a multitude of standards, but as long as perennials are available or seedlings have appeared, livestock can graze off the land after two growing seasons. Other fire damaged areas can take up to five years before grazing is allowed. He gave his opinion that on rangelands dominated with annual grasses, it is appropriate for the livestock to be grazing there the first year after a fire.

The Committee was interested in how to be more effective with decision making agencies on the above issues. **Mr. Butler** observed that the Rangeland Resource Center has a good reputation, works on valuable projects, and over the years has developed positive relationships with those involved; however, a disgruntled group may still choose to file a lawsuit. Sometimes a settlement can be reached. Meanwhile, agencies continue to work on monitoring and building rapport with ranchers. The objective is to look after the resources and make recommendations for affected riparian-wetland areas.

In response to questions about the feral pig problem, as well as the invasive species of tamarisk and salt cedars, **Mr. Butler** verified that the feral hog situation is confined to Owyhee county and the Bruneau area along the river. The salt cedar and tamarisk issues are mostly localized and there are projects in place to research them further.

Referring to the scientific basis of the projects and research being done, specifically the fire and cheat grass issues, **Mr. Butler** acknowledged that these are still key issues, along with targeted grazing. He verified that relevant research continues, and in time more findings will be certain. Other projects are emerging and moving forward, but solid information takes longer to gather and discern the findings.

ADJOURN: There being no further business to come before the committee, the meeting adjourned at 2:45 p.m.

Representative Andrus
Chair

Kim Jensen-Porter
Secretary