

MINUTES
SENATE AGRICULTURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

DATE: Tuesday, February 17, 2026

TIME: 8:00 A.M.

PLACE: Room WW53

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chairman Nichols, Vice Chairman Zito, Senators Brooks (Lakey), Lent, VanOrden, Blaylock, Kohl, Semmelroth, and Taylor

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 Nichols** called the meeting of the Senate Agricultural Affairs Committee (Committee) to order at 8:01 a.m.

INTRODUCTION: FFA State Officer Introduction and Presentation: Each Future Farmers of America (FFA) officer introduced themselves, identified their hometown, current college, and field of study, and shared their favorite supervised agricultural experience (SAE) projects and career development events (CDE).

The officers overviewed FFA as a national, student-led organization for agricultural education and leadership. They explained the Three Circle Model, which included classroom instruction, CDE's, leadership development events (LDE), and SAE's. Idaho had approximately 105 different chapters, each with their own classroom experiences, and state officers worked to visit each chapter annually. SAEs allowed students to apply classroom knowledge through hands-on agricultural projects, which generated more than \$13 million for Idaho's economy during the past year. State members could attend multiple state conferences and an annual state convention in Twin Falls. They reported that Idaho FFA members completed almost 15,000 hours of community service. They extended an invitation for the Senators to attend their upcoming state convention.

PASSED THE GAVEL: Chairman Nichols passed the gavel to Vice Chairman Zito.

S 1270 **ALTERNATIVE ANIMAL PROTEINS - Adds to existing law to establish provisions regarding alternative animal protein labeling, oversight, and penalties.** **Chairman Nichols** explained the legislation focused on labeling requirements for cell-cultivated animal protein products. **S 1270's** sole purpose was to keep consumers informed through clear and honest labeling. Cell-cultivated animal protein products were required to be clearly identified as such. The use of terms associated with specific meat cuts, such as steak, roast, or brisket was prohibited. Other states had enacted similar labeling laws focused on transparency. **Chairman Nichols** stated the bill was developed with input from stakeholders, Idaho citizens, and the Good Food Institute. She noted amendments focused on three key refinements: tightening and clarifying definitions to narrow the scope to cell-cultivated animal protein products; refining labeling and marketing language to apply only to cell-cultivated products and to align with existing federal authority; and revising the penalty section to focus on compliance, providing that no civil penalties would be assessed for good faith errors promptly corrected after notice. She stated that enforcement authority would remain with the Idaho State Department of

Agriculture (ISDA) under the existing regulatory framework. She requested that the Committee send the bill to the amending order for technical clarifications.

TESTIMONY:

Ms. Elizabeth Criner, Food Northwest, thanked the bill sponsors for their communication and willingness to address their concerns. She explained how state labeling laws affected the national production and distribution of food and required costly changes to manufacturing, labeling, warehousing, inventory, and distribution. She noted how other states already had varying labeling requirements, which ultimately increased consumer cost. Food Northwest supported national labeling policies to provide clarity and avoid consumer confusion. She argued the use of meat cut terms could also apply to products such as veggie burgers, black bean burgers, and steak fries. She expressed her appreciation for changes to the penalty provisions, noting that the original penalties could have been detrimental to smaller manufacturers.

Mr. Russ Hendricks, Idaho Farm Bureau (IFB), stated his support for **S 1270**. He explained how IFB members were interested in ensuring consumer transparency and minimizing consumer confusion. The American Farm Bureau had policy which supported prohibiting the use of commonly-known and industry-recognized meat terms in the labeling and advertising of all lab-grown proteins. These new products attempted to use the goodwill associated with traditional meat terms. He supported sending the bill to the amending order to address Ms. Criner's concerns and to create labeling conformity between states.

DISCUSSION:

Senator Blaylock asked how Food Northwest currently conducted their labeling for lab-cultured meat products in Idaho. **Ms. Criner** noted that although Food Northwest was not currently utilizing such products, the proposed legislation would remain in statute moving forward. She stated it was unclear when the federal government would establish a functional national labeling standard and that future market demand for these products was uncertain. **Senator Blaylock** asked whether the passage of **S 1270** could encourage the federal government to adopt national labeling standards. **Ms. Criner** explained Food Northwest encouraged the use of memorials or communication with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), as opposed to establishing state-based regulation. She added that if consumer demand changed, companies would remain subject to state law until federal action was taken, creating a potential marketplace barrier.

Senator Kohl referred to how multiple states had adopted labeling requirements and asked whether the addition of Idaho would significantly harm the market. **Ms. Criner** stated it would create an additional layer of complexity, as every state involved had passed different labeling requirements. **Senator Kohl** referred to Idaho's beef industry and asked if Idaho had a footprint within the lab-grown meat industry. **Ms. Criner** explained she did not represent lab-grown meat entities and was unsure whether the USDA had approved of lab-grown beef. She noted consumer demand would ultimately drive the marketplace. **Senator Kohl** suggested labeling requirements for alternative proteins may protect Idaho's beef industry, as the alternative protein industry was encroaching on ranchers. He asked if **S 1270** would harm Idaho producers. **Ms. Criner** explained the matter concerned the functionality of food distribution using state-based labeling regulations.

Senator Lent stated there appeared to be two lines of thought regarding the issue: protecting the clarity of traditional agricultural products and protecting consumers. The speaker expressed concern that referencing consumer protection could imply a hazard and asked whether there was any known hazard associated with these types of products. **Ms. Criner** responded products that were sold in the United States had been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and movement from FDA approval to USDA approval involved a complex and lengthy

regulatory process. Both agencies jointly oversaw this segment of food production. **Senator Lent** wanted clarification on whether a consumer hazard existed. He emphasized the importance of distinguishing the issue to address labeling rather than safety. **Ms. Criner** agreed the matter regarded labeling transparency. She stated her organization was ready to work with the federal government to establish a national label. She explained the patchwork increased costs for the producer, which in turn could increase consumer cost.

Senator Taylor queried about the scope of the cell-cultivated protein industry in Idaho and if it posed a current threat to Idaho's cattle operations. **Mr. Hendricks** responded he was unsure of the cell-cultivated protein industry's scope in Idaho, but rather the legislation would address labeling concerns proactively to avoid future consumer confusion. **Senator VanOrden** pondered if there was any federal movement regarding this issue and if there may be a federal label requirement for this product in the future. **Mr. Hendricks** stated he did not have direct knowledge about federal efforts, but from his experience, action at the state level was faster and oftentimes created pressure for the federal government to act.

DISCUSSION:

Chairman Nichols compared the issue with genetically-modified organisms (GMOs), explaining state-level action led to eventual federal involvement. She explained the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) reviewed and pre-approved labels for cell-cultivated meat and poultry products before entering the market. Labels that had been approved used terms such as cell cultivated salmon. **Chairman Nichols** referenced the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA) and the Poultry Products Inspection Act (PPIA), explaining states were prohibited from imposing labeling requirements that were additional to or different from federal requirements for federally inspected meat and poultry products, in order to avoid a patchwork of state-specific labeling standards. 17 other states had taken action to promote consistency and encourage eventual federal adoption of labeling standards. **Chairman Nichols** emphasized the issue was about transparency and informed consumer decision-making. She stated the Idaho Cattle Association supported the measure to ensure a distinction between traditional meat products and cell-cultivated products. **S 1270** aimed to address labeling proactively. She requested **S 1270** be sent to the amending order and indicated a willingness to incorporate requested refinements.

Senator Semmelroth asked what conversations she had with the ISDA in regards to their possible authority to conduct label inspections. **Chairman Nichols** deferred to Director Tewart. **Ms. Chanel Tewart**, Director, ISDA, stated enforcement would likely fall to their animal division, which had a statewide network of investigators. She noted the ISDA had previously worked in this area before amendments were made to the FMIA.

Senator Blaylock asked Chairman Nichols if Idaho had any lab-cultivated meat producers and if any restaurants had served this type of product. **Chairman Nichols** stated she did not believe any lab-cultivated meat producers were in Idaho, but knew a company called Believer Meats was producing lab-cultivated meat. She noted the bill also applied to products shipped into Idaho. **Senator Blaylock** asked if she knew of any restaurants in the state that would have to implement the proposed labeling requirement. **Chairman Nichols** answered the labeling requirement was primarily for producers rather than restaurants. **Senator Blaylock** referred to **S 1270** and recited that "restaurants or other vendors that offer for sale alternative animal proteins shall provide labeling on menus". She asked if this legislation applied to restaurants that were serving such products. **Chairman Nichols** answered affirmatively.

MOTION: **Senator Kohl** moved to send **S 1270** to the 14th Order of Business for possible amendment. **Senator Semmelroth** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

S 1271 **RATS - Adds to existing law to declare certain rats a public health and safety nuisance and to require abatement.** **Chairman Nichols** stated **S 1271** addressed the increasing presence of Norway and roof rats, and the risks they posed to public health, agriculture, infrastructure, and property. Both the Ada County Pest and Abatement Director and the Director of the ISDA confirmed rat activity was increasing and that early coordination efforts were more cost effective than reactive measures. **Chairman Nichols** explained **S 1271** defined Norway rats and roof rats as public nuisances, invasive species, and agricultural pests under existing Idaho law; placed coordination responsibility with the ISDA using existing authority; and improved reporting, transparency, and public education so infestation could be identified and addressed. She noted the bill did not ban rats as pets or animal feed, did not create new enforcement powers or penalties, and did not require city or county participation.

Ms. Tewalt, Director, ISDA, explained how invasive species programs, such as the quagga mussel program, had been developed over many years with legislative guidance and coordination efforts with various jurisdictions. She stated that under **S 1271**, the ISDA would act as a convener to facilitate conservations with local entities.

DISCUSSION: **Senator Taylor** asked whether addressing the rat issue would require a lengthy process similar to the development of the State's quagga mussel program. **Ms. Tewalt** responded that similar to the quagga mussel program, actions would be taken immediately, with additional elements being added over time. She noted program development required facilitation, rulemaking meetings, and stakeholder involvement. **Senator Taylor** asked if the rat issue would follow the same process as quagga mussels. **Ms. Tewalt** stated the bill provided clear rulemaking authority and would require a public rulemaking process, likely conducted over the course of a summer.

TESTIMONY: The following spoke in opposition to **S 1271**:

- Benjamin Miller, Idaho Pest Management Association.
- Kirk Dean, Idaho Pest Management Association (IPMA).

Mr. Miller's reasons to oppose **S 1271** included the legislation being unfunded, the nature of rat eradication and the need for ongoing surveillance, and the uneasiness people experienced about government officials conducting inspections in their homes. **Mr. Dean** was concerned **S 1271** would divert funds from existing ISDA priorities into addressing the rat issue. He noted the government's role in this issue should be in public education, reporting, coordination, data collection, and sanitation outreach. He explained the State's expansion into operational abatement risked displacing many locally owned pest control companies and increased taxpayer burden. He lastly explained licensed pest management professionals carried insurance, whereas litigation against the State would be paid through public funds.

DISCUSSION: **Senator Semmelroth** asked if the legislation would give the ISDA authority to enter people's homes. **Mr. Miller** replied the legislation was very vague on the ISDA's authority. He noted the IPMA was concerned about the rat issue and wanted to be a part of the rulemaking process. **Senator Lent** pondered how much this type of program would cost. **Mr. Miller** was unsure. **Senator Kohl** asked if the private sector was equipped for this type of abatement. He further asked what the cost would be if the State had abatement authority. **Mr. Dean** stated there were hundreds of pest control companies already dealing with the rat issue and that the cost of State abatement would be high.

TESTIMONY: The following spoke in favor of **S 1271**:

- Jane Rohling, constituent.
- Rick Just, constituent.
- Luci Willits, Boise City Council member.

The reasons given to support **S 1271** included their personal experiences with rats and the need to take immediate action. **Mr. Just** noted Alberta, Canada implemented a successful rat abatement program and suggested the ISDA draw insight from their model.

DISCUSSION: **Mr. Adam Schroeder**, Director, Ada County Weed, Pest, and Mosquito Abatement, neither opposed or supported **S 1271**, but discussed compromises. He agreed local pest control operators were the experts in rodent control, but noted they were incentivized by individuals who wanted their services. He stated the government's role should focus on documentation, reporting, educational outreach, and inspections while incorporating local pest control professionals.

Senator VanOrden asked Mr. Schroeder to clarify whether he believed the proper role of government was to provide information to affected residents which would possibly include providing a list of pest control companies. **Mr. Schroeder** responded that government programs in other jurisdictions varied but were often administered through health departments, districts, or cities and typically focused on education outreach and inspection services.

Senator VanOrden inquired whether cities and counties would be financially responsible for addressing the issue under existing budgets. **Chairman Nichols** responded that amendments to **S 1271** ensured cities and counties would not be burdened if funds were unavailable and that work would occur within existing abatement funding. **Ms. Tewalt** explained that under the Invasive Species Act and the Plant Pest Act, the ISDA had deficiency warrant authority that did not draw on existing agency funds. The department would first conduct rulemaking to determine stakeholder expectations. If necessary, the department could request a deficiency warrant from the Board of Examiners. This process was regularly used for invasive species. **Senator VanOrden** queried if the ISDA utilized individualized contractors to address some eradication efforts. **Ms. Tewalt** stated it depended on the situation; they could contract with private companies for treatments or work directly with producers.

Chairman Nichols thanked those who testified and stated the legislation was intended as a first, proactive step to determine the scope of the rat issue and to develop a plan. She proposed amendments to page two, subsection five, adding language specifying that actions would be subject to the availability of personnel, equipment, and funding, and that nothing in the subsection would be construed to require participation or the expenditure of local funds. **Chairman Nichols** requested **S 1271** be sent to the amending order.

MOTION: **Senator Semmelroth** moved to send **S 1271** to the 14th Order of Business for possible amendment. **Senator VanOrden** seconded the motion.

DISCUSSION: **Senator Lent and Senator Kohl** voiced their concerns about **S 1271** being an unfunded mandate and that it would be in competition with the private abatement sector. They both believed this issue should be dealt with at the local level. **Senator Taylor** noted the issue could be dealt with through abatement districts.

Chairman Nichols requested a roll call vote and noted this legislation would work with abatement districts and enact coordination efforts to maintain control of the rat issue. **Senator VanOrden** stated she believed in limited government and the importance of the private sector, but noted the testifiers who had been dealing with this issue for years and that this problem may be getting out of hand.

ROLL CALL VOTE: **Senators Nichols, Brooks, VanOrden, Blaylock, and Semmelroth** voted Aye. **Senators Zito, Lent, Kohl, and Taylor** voted Nay. The motion to send **S 1271** to the 14th Order of Business for possible amendment carried.

PASSED THE GAVEL: Vice Chairman Zito passed the gavel to Chairman Nichols.

PRESENTATION: University of Idaho (U of I) - Update. **Ms. Rachael Bickerton**, Senior Director, Government and External Relations, U of I, provided an overview of the college's mission as Idaho's land-grant university, emphasizing public service through strengthening the economy and agricultural productivity. The Dean met with growers, producers, and stakeholders statewide to assess their needs. U of I awarded more than \$1 million in scholarships, and 90% of graduates placed in jobs within six months of graduation. She noted that all meat science program graduates placed in jobs within one year of graduation. **Ms. Bickerton** highlighted the agricultural commodity risk management program as preparing students to manage market risk. She described research efforts in food systems, family and community development, water resources, soil health, and animal and veterinary science. Through their extension program, the college operated 10 research and extension centers, had a presence in all 44 counties and in 3 tribal reservations, and administered the 4-H program.

Ms. Bickerton announced the opening of the Meat Science and Innovation Center, which replaced their facility building from the 1960s. The new facility, funded through state and industry partnerships, would house Vandal Brand Meats and expand workforce training for the meat industry. She provided updates on the Idaho Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment (CAFE), which upon completion, would become the largest research dairy in the nation. The project was supported by state funding, industry contributions, and up to \$6 million in federal funding for collaboration with the USDA Agricultural Research Service on a manure treatment facility. She stated that an additional \$3 million had been signed into law by President Donald Trump for the facility. She highlighted the forthcoming Deep Soil Ecotron facility, which enabled soil research to depths of 10 feet, and noted its importance to soil health priorities.

Ms. Bickerton reported that the Idaho Water Resources Research Institute (IWRRI) had received a \$1 million appropriation to address state water priorities, working collaboratively with faculty from Boise State University (BSU), U of I, and Idaho State University (ISU). Research priorities included snowpack monitoring, aquifer recharge, water quality, and improved access to water data. **Ms. Bickerton** stated the college had paused hiring for several key faculty positions to identify where they could increase efficiencies. Operational costs were reduced, as seasonal positions were cut, hands-on experience opportunities were reduced in their vet program, and department heads were appointed from existing faculty without backfilling their prior roles (Attachment 1 and 2).

ADJOURNED: There being no further business at this time, **Chairman Nichols** adjourned the meeting at 9:43 a.m.

Senator Nichols
Chair

Rachel Verrette
Secretary