A Special Update for Idaho Conservation Leaders

NRCS Executive Update

United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

"Helping People Help the Land"

National Study Completed on Idaho Forest Soils

To form an inch of soil can take 500 years, but it takes little time to impact it. Soil provides the foundation for our livelihood and yet it is often treated like --dirt. However, unlike dirt, soil is vitally important for the successful growth of all plants. In June, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) partnered with other federal, state, and local agencies to pilot a national sampling project on forest soils in northern Idaho.

Soil scientists collect samples from one of the test sites.

The innovative study, conducted with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), the University of Idaho (UI) and the Intermountain Forest Tree Nutrition Cooperative (IFTNC), is the first kind of this magnitude in the nation. One objective of this two-week study was to collect data on forest soils to determine how the treatment or management of the forest in the past has affected the quality of the soil and the overall forest health today.

"National studies have never been conducted on the highly productive forest soils of the northwestern US," said Bruce Knapp, Resource Soil Scientist. "We have documented the entire process to establish a national template for sampling forest soils under diverse management."

Without healthy soils, forests would not be capable of efficiently producing the wood that supplies construction materials, paper products, certain medicines and numerous associated products. Healthy forests provide habitat for wildlife and help reduce soil erosion, among other benefits.

"We've changed the way we look at things,' said Brian Gardner, Soil Survey Project Leader. "Now, we're looking at those soil factors that change with management such as bulk density, surface displacement, and organic matter content."

Foresters sample properties above ground, such as plant diversity and ground cover.

The team is collecting data to determine if past practices such as clear-cut, pile and burn, and heavy equipment logging have damaged soil quality. "If so, then the next step is determining if we can restore the soil or live with what we have," said Frank Gariglio, State Forester.

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Riparian Area Benefits from EQIP

Bill Jones has spent most of his life along Billingsley Creek — farming, fishing, hunting. Over the years, he's watched the creek gradually widen from an average of about 30 to 35-feet across to 120-feet; it became more shallow and slowed down.

Billingsley Creek has its own pollution loading plan within the greater Mid-Snake-Rock plan because of its special concerns as a fishery and the backup water supply for the City of Hagerman. But that's not why Jones turned to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for assistance in restoring the half-mile stretch of Billingsley Creek that runs through his property. "I wanted to do this for my grandchildren," he says simply.

Jones began Phase I of the multiyear project in the spring of 2000. Rock weirs and lunker boxes were used to narrow a 800-stretch of the creek. About 80 willows were also planted to shade the creek. In the spring of 2005, Jones began Phase II which included dredging a 1,700-foot stretch of creek to physically reshape the creek bed and to create deep holes in the bends. Fiber rolls were used to narrow the stream channel to 15 to 25-feet across.

View of Billingsley Creek after Phase I project.

Jones has received about $42,000 of cost-share assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program so far for the restoration efforts along with grants from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game and the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality.

While improving fish habitat has been a benefit of the project, improving water quality is the primary goal.

"The water quality leaving the ranch is much better than what it is entering the ranch," said Steve Thompson, NRCS district conservationist in Gooding County. Thompson has worked with Jones on the first two phases of this project and is looking forward to starting the final phase later this fall.

Conservationist's Corner

Richard Sims
State Conservationist
Idaho NRCS

"Natural Disasters"

Last week our agency was invited to a meeting at the Idaho State Department of Agriculture along with other state and federal agencies, landowners, and congressional staff. The goal was to share information on current actions and potential ideas that could help the ranchers of Idaho deal with the recent wildfires. It was very evident that all parties were fully engaged and concerned for the welfare of the producers in Idaho.

NRCS will conduct a special Environmental Quality Incentives Program fire initiative sign-up to assist landowners affected by the blazes. The signup will run from August 1-15. This sign-up is for remaining FY 07 dollars; however, we will utilize FY 08 dollars once Congress appropriates them.

We will provide as one-time $11 per acre incentive payment for grazing land acres that have been burned. The acres burned will need to be deferred from grazing for approximately one year. The incentive payment will allow landowners to conduct activities to maintain the health of the livestock. Fire season has just started and NRCS will be ready to assist producers affected by this disaster.

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National Study on Forest Soils (cont'd)

There were more than 15 soil scientists, foresters, biologists and other specialists on board who helped complete the study. Of the 10 test sites, five of them were control or mature forest sites; the other five had documented logging history. Scientists collected data from each soil site, testing for compaction, infiltration, organic matter and plant diversity; they also data on above ground resources. It is expected to take up to two years for lab technicians to analyze the 250 - 300 samples collected.

"The data and future work resulting from this pilot study could possibly ensure the health of forest soils and forests forever," said Dave Hoover, State Soil Scientist.

Snapshots from the Field

More than 400 sixth graders experienced an outdoors classroom at the Environmental Awareness Days, hosted by the Nez Perce Soil and Water Conservation District. NRCS and other employees from federal, state and local agencies taught classes, as participants chose from conservation, fisheries, soils, wildlife and other courses.

The Three Rivers RC&D Wildland Fire Education and Prevention Program helped one neighborhood in the Pocatello Creak area reduce fire hazards to their homes and surrounding property. Utilizing WPEP and the local fire department, neighbors put in 168 hours to remove woody material from their home--reducing wildfire risks while strengthening their community.

Pollinator Potential in Idaho

Pollinators provide essential services in nature. Animals pollinate approximately 75 percent of crop plants grown nationwide for food, fiber, medicines and more. They are necessary to ensure the production of fruit and fertile seed sets in many crops.

Over the past few decades, there has been a steady decline of populations of some animal pollinators. Pollinator habitats have been destroyed and fragmented, greatly reducing native pollinator food sources and sites for mating, nesting and migration.

As a result, NRCS and partners are launching a pollinator initiative this fall to increase the amount of pollinator-friendly plantings in the Treasure Valley. This initiative will provide financial assistance to landowners through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program. More information on restoring and expanding pollinator populations will be available this fall.