

Conservation districts celebrate Earth Day every day

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For the Capital Press

Before you woke up this morning, a group of environmentalists were already awake, hard at work improving and conserving Idaho's natural resources. When they come home tonight, their boots will be covered in dirt, their hands muddy from fixing irrigation lines, and their brains racked from trying to think of a way to grow more crops using less water.

April 22 was Earth Day, but every day is Earth Day for Idaho's soil and water conservation districts.

During the Dust Bowl, the federal government sought out local landowners to help solve the erosion problem plaguing our nation. President Franklin D. Roosevelt encouraged the formation of local conservation districts, and Idaho landowners created the first five soil and water conservation districts in 1939. Their goal was to promote nonregulatory conservation to preserve and protect Idaho's natural resources. Today, there are 50 individual districts working to make improvements to our state's environment.

Conservation district boards are made up of farmers, ranchers and private landowners. The projects they complete seldom make the news; however, these projects have increased agriculture production while saving water, keeping the air clean and keeping millions of tons of sediment from entering our rivers.

Soil and water conservation districts, true experts in land and natural resource management, help landowners develop common-sense solutions to natural resource conservation.

Here are a few projects from some of the districts around Idaho:

- * The Gem Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) helped a landowner install a pivot irrigation line on his land, which resulted in reducing sediment loads by 324 tons per year.
- * The Squaw Creek Soil Conservation District treated 12,800 acres of forest land in Fiscal Year 2010 with tree planting and thinning, noxious weed control and stock watering facilities.
- * The Adams SWCD is implementing the Little Weiser River stream bank stabilization and rehabilitation project in Adams and Washington counties. Their goal is to prevent stream bank and stream channel erosion, thus protecting farmland, improving the flood channel, irrigation diversion and wildlife habitat through enhanced riparian areas.

* The Bonner SWCD has taken the lead in addressing aquatic invasive species by managing boat inspection stations. This has protected Priest Lake, Lake Pend Orielle, and other bodies of water in Bonner County.

* The West Side SWCD helped landowners install over a half-mile (2,733 feet) of center pivot irrigation lines in their district. These systems are highly water-efficient, and save tons of soil from eroding into nearby streams and creeks.

* The Latah SWCD recently completed work on the Corral Creek Steelhead Habitat Restoration Project. This created 18 miles of habitat upstream from Corral Creek by restoring the stream channel, allowing water to flow naturally from the creek to the Potlatch River. They also revegetated the stream bank and meadow with native plant species to reduce erosion, enhance stream bank stability, and provide shading for the fish.

* Ada SWCD's biggest project this past year included active natural resource management of all Ada County conservation easement parcels -- over 800 acres -- as well as the management of the Avimor Planned Community conservation easement -- 400 acres -- for protection and enhancement of open space and wildlife habitat.

Soil conservation districts don't have one day a year to celebrate Earth Day; for them, it's every day. Districts produce tangible, common-sense solutions to save natural resources and each day improve the world around them.

We simply don't see these kinds of positive results from individual activists. You will not find Idaho's True Environmentalists at an Earth Day rally; they are too busy actively saving resources and getting their hands dirty.

Bret Rumbeck is executive director of the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts. He wrote this on behalf of the association's board of directors: Randy Purser, president; Kit Tillotson, vice president; Steve Becker, treasurer; Billie Brown, secretary; and David Ascuena and Rick Rodgers, directors.