



**Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts
Board of Directors Meeting
February 26, 2020
Conference Call**

CALL TO ORDER

President Steve Becker called the meeting of the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts Board of Directors to order at 8:00 PM on

PRESENT

Thursday, February 26, 2020. Those present included Steve Becker, Matt Woodard, Richard Kunau, Mike Somerville, Tom Daniel, Kit Tillotson and Benjamin Kelly.

ISWCC LAWSUIT

Steve Becker thanked the board for participating on short notice and reviewed the complaint filed as plaintiffs by the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission on August 19, 2019. The complaint is filed against Franklin Soil and Water Conservation District, the individual Franklin Soil and Water Conservation District board supervisors and the Franklin Soil and Water Conservation District manager as defendants.

ISWCC BUDGET

Steve Becker asked to have an open discussion amongst the IASCD Board on how to proceed regarding the latest legislative developments and wanted board members suggestions on a letter to send out to districts.

**SEQUENCE OF
EVENTS**

This winter the IASCD Board of Directors was approached by legislators concerned of the ramifications of conservation districts not being adequately funded and that, "in their terms" approximately 1/3 of actual dollars makes its way to conservation districts. We were pleased that the message was getting out and that in a year where all statewide budgets (except education) are being cut by 2%, conservation districts requests are being heard. Also, at play in all of this from a legislative standpoint, is the situation between a specific conservation district and the commission over the last two years. As a general backdrop to all this, there is also a significant push over the last year of the Governor and the Legislature to begin looking at state agency rules and efficiencies through the Red Tape Reduction Act.

In the initial discussions from legislators it was asked why the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission couldn't simply be removed and the current allocations through base funding and trustee & benefits be distributed to districts equally to further minimize state government. Our response included a lengthy explanation of the function of Idaho's 50 conservation districts, the function of the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission and why conservation districts need an adequate base level of funding throughout the state than is currently appropriated by the legislature.

BACKGROUND

Since the economic downturn there has been a need to restore adequate levels of support and funding to Idaho's Conservation Districts. At that time changes were made to the Idaho Soil & Water Commission (ISWCC) to bring the top-heavy agency more in line with efficient practices to serve conservation districts in the state and to get more of the funds allocated directly on the ground. Also, prior to 2008 and 2009, there had been a large amount of historical technical and employee support from both the Idaho

Association of Soil Conservation Districts (IASCD) and ISWCC that was diminished as Idaho had to react to the unprecedented economic circumstances.

Since then, conservation districts, and in turn IASCD, has set its priority to restore stability and sustainability to districts to carry out their mission. It has included the need to build minimum capacity and a stable baseline so that districts can provide locally led, voluntary conservation projects to protect Idaho's landowners and natural resources. As we have worked closely with the primary legislators on this issue, they have been responsive and willing to accept our suggestions in an effort to do what is best for conservation districts and not simply serve their own priorities. The IASCD Board has been clear that if there is to be the removal of the commission from the Governor's office, IASCD strongly advises the Governor's lead and support, conservation districts input & the entire reallocation of commission funding directly to districts, distributed evenly at the level of \$62,500. The Governor's Office has been in meetings and is aware of discussions, but staff will not be looking proposals until after the legislature adjourns.

MODIFICATIONS SUGGESTED

District funding is also passed through the state commissions budget to districts. To streamline this process, funding could be distributed directly to districts by the Governor's Office or Department of Financial Management annually. As an example, and though the entirety of funding sources directed to counties is complex, the portion of funding directly to counties from the state is distributed by the Controller though the Tax Commission in the same way. The Controller could cut 50 checks, one time a year. By removing another level of government, districts could be funded at an adequate level, while looking at providing the same or better services to their local communities.

FUNDING SOURCE

Currently the funding source from the state to districts includes a complicated match formula unlike any other we are aware of, that requires agency employees and conservation district staff to spend a large amount of time on compiling reports. Not only is the formula complicated, but the rules attached to the formula have hindered clarity and caused confusion. With the match formula eliminated, a minimum funding level of \$62,500 a year per district would allow those funds to be substantially leveraged at a more efficient rate and promote those dollars to be directly stimulated and regenerated in local communities. This would consist of an annual allocation of \$3,125,000 (ISWCC budget is at \$3,285,200 prior to this year's holdback) set in statute, that would allow the legislature to consistently know what to budget for. It would also provide districts to be adequately and consistently funded.

OVERSIGHT

The impacts of these changes further decrease government in Idaho and remove rules that often cause more confusion than clarity. It will also place conservation districts directly under the governance of current statute, as well as the statutorily mandated processes of annual or biannual audit requirements and annual reporting through the legislatures small governing agency portal. With districts finding a sustainable level, they would have the opportunity to work with local businesses and contractors at the local level. This also benefits state government being in the unenviable position of competing with private business for engineering and technical assistance

contracting services. Current ISWCC TMDL work could also be assigned to districts or could be co-opted by other state agencies already set up to do so.

CLOSING

We have asked for ample time for conservation districts to digest what is being proposed and to provide input on how any proposal going forward could be made better. Legislators will be drawing up legislative language in bill form, a polished-rough draft of sorts, so that districts can see what changes would be possibly discussed for the 2021 legislative session. We will be discussing these possibilities at our spring and fall division meetings and will send out the legislative language as soon as it has been printed. The timeframe for the language should be in March, but a specific day has not been settled upon.

Kit Tillotson moved a letter be drafted to all 50 Conservation Districts and that the letter be sent to the board for their approval being sent. Seconded. Passed.

ADJOURNMENT

Tom Daniel moved to adjourn the meeting. Seconded. Passed. The meeting was adjourned at 9:25 PM.

Respectfully submitted
Benjamin Kelly, Executive Director