

Table of Contents

Chapter # - Title	2
Heading 2.....	3
Desired Outcomes	Error! Bookmark not defined.



Field during cutting – Carol Waller

Chapter 4 - Agriculture

Vision Blaine County recognizes productive agricultural land as a key asset to our quality of life. We value working agrarian landscapes and respect the needs of the farming and ranching community. We embrace local food production and sustainable practices on all farms and ranches.

Key Guiding Principle

Agriculture is an important tradition and an economic resource for our community. The County intends to preserve productive agricultural lands.

Blaine County's history is closely tied to its agricultural lands. Farmers and ranchers were early settlers and have contributed to our local culture through many generations. Farming and ranching operations, both large and small, continue to contribute to our economy by providing high-quality crops, local produce and livestock, and

direct and indirect employment. Working agricultural landscapes also contribute to scenic open space, wildlife habitat and movement corridors throughout the County. Preserving ecosystems and sustaining the health of the land benefit agriculture, the environment and the economy. Land use regulation should support agriculture as a valued land use, minimize conflicts between agricultural and residential uses and help to conserve the natural environment.

Setting

Farming and ranching has been an important part of the Blaine County economy and lifestyle since the first farmers arrived in 1879. Early farms were scattered throughout the County. Today, most farms are located south of Bellevue in and around the “Triangle” created by US Highway 20, State Highway 75 and Gannett Road, as well as in the Carey area.

Sheep ranching was a prominent activity at the turn of the century. By 1900, more than two million sheep had been trailed through the Wood River Valley. Ketchum was one of the largest sheep-shipping centers of the United States, thanks to the Union Pacific Railroad connection constructed in 1884. According to the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, the numbers of sheep and other livestock in Idaho were substantially higher prior to World War II than today.

Working farms and ranches were also important to early recreation, with hunting and fishing occurring on private property as well as public lands.

Blaine County's population expanded rapidly beginning in the 1970s, growing by 230 percent by the year 2000. By the 1990s, the agricultural community split over conflicting priorities of keeping land in production versus expanding the rights to develop it. Privacy and public access were issues of growing concern. A subdivision in the heart of the “Triangle”, recorded in 2000, resulted in a lawsuit by neighboring agriculture operators. A proposed urban-like community south of Bellevue and rumors of a “new town” near the intersection of Highways 20 and 75 further increased concerns over rapid development.

Concern for potentially adverse impacts of the development boom on sensitive lands and wildlife, as well as agricultural operations, resulted in an 18-month moratorium on subdivisions in the agricultural districts. The Board of Commissioners, Planning and Zoning Commission, staff and consultants used this time to engage the whole

community in a land use planning process called “Blaine County 2025.” It resulted in numerous ordinance and Comprehensive Plan amendments intended to sustain agriculture, protect sensitive lands and guide growth toward existing urban centers.

Economy

Agriculture is a key land use and industry throughout Idaho. While Idaho agriculture has changed over the past few decades, it remains the state's leading natural resource-based industry. Idaho produces 185 agricultural commodities and is ranked in the top 10 for the production of 25 different crops and livestock.

While Blaine County is statistically a small part of statewide agriculture, it contributes significantly to the state's economy and rural values. Farming and ranching activities here must meet the challenges of high altitude and climate, topography and natural features, which combine to create a different agricultural landscape than much of southern Idaho. Even so, agricultural lands comprise approximately 58 percent of private land in the County.

The market value of the County's agricultural products was \$38.5 million in 2012.¹ These products are often of a very high quality, garnering top prices in the commodity marketplace. Local restaurants source foods from up to 30 local growers.

The actual sector job count reported by the Idaho Department of Labor is low. Farming and ranching accounted for 110 jobs in 2012, less than one percent of total covered jobs.² The 2012 Census of Agriculture reported 392 “hired workers.” The indirect jobs created by agriculture add to a positive economic impact. The value of agriculture to the

¹ 2012 Census of Agriculture

² Not including self-employed, seasonal or part-time workers

overall economy will be further explored in Chapter 8, Economic Development.

Farming and ranching often are integrated activities within the same farm operation. Some operations are spread across multiple properties in different areas of the county. These other properties, large

and small, are either leased or custom farmed. Specialized agriculture-related enterprises such as tree farms and equestrian operations are found in several locations. Equestrian activities, which include breeding, boarding, rehabilitation and riding, also are addressed in Chapter 3, Recreation.

Farming

Most of the County's private land was farmland and ranchland until the 1960s, when lands between Ketchum and Bellevue gradually were converted to residential use. Today, farmlands are predominantly in the south part of the County on land zoned A-20 and A-40, as shown on Map 4.1. The US National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) reported 186

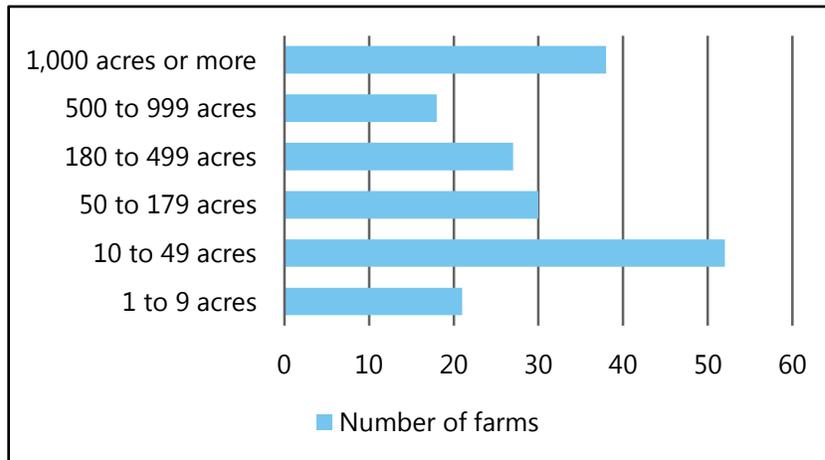
farms with 179,130 deeded acres of farmland in Blaine County in 2012, with an average of 963 acres and a median of 135 acres per farm operation. This median is a drop from 203 acres since the 2007 Agricultural Census. Nearly 40 percent of the farms are less than 50 acres. The number of farms by size is shown in Chart 1. A farm includes all the lands operated by one operator (not necessarily contiguous).

The term "farming," for the purposes of this Plan, means the business of growing crops and/or food. Crops are divided into three primary categories: commodity, organic and specialty crops. They are further described below.



Barley Field – Sarah Gardner

Chart 1: Blaine County Farms by Size



Source: USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2012 Census of Agriculture



Wheel lines – Sarah Gardner



Barley Harvest – Jeremy Lato

According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), "Prime farmland is land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber and oilseed crops. It has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to economically produce sustained high yields of crops." NRCS recommends that counties use the designation as a land use planning tool when determining whether to preserve these lands for agriculture in a responsible, sustainable manner. Some of the farmland in the County contains prime agricultural soils, shown in Maps 4.2 and 4.2.1. These soils have been prone to erosion by wind and water due to common use of conventional tillage methods in the past and extremes of climate. More detail on prime, unique and important soils statewide can be found in the Appendix.

Commodity Crops

The top two commodity crops grown in the County are alfalfa hay and barley. 2012 crop yields are shown in Table 1. The barley and alfalfa grown here are known for their high quality. The hay includes alfalfa, grass/alfalfa and straight grass hay, providing feed for dairy and beef cattle, sheep, horses and other farm animals. Several varieties of barley are grown. The majority is malted and used to make beer. Many farmers hold annual contracts with large beer manufacturers. Barley and most other commodity crops are transported out of the County.

Table 1: Blaine County Commodity Crops, 2012

Crop	Acres in 2012	Yield
Alfalfa (Hay)	24,171	83,311 tons
Barley	15,158	1,672,438 bushels
Wheat	1,700	96,802 bushels
Potatoes	Data not published	Data not published

Source: USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2012 Census of Agriculture

Organic Crops

Of the eight southern Idaho counties, Blaine County has the second highest sales of certified organic crops, which are produced by 14 farms. Organic hay is increasingly common and some grain farmers have branched into the organic market, with a variety of experimental grains. Numerous other farms could qualify for organic status, but the owners/operators find the official designation is not worth the extra time and expense.

Table 2: Southern Idaho Organic Production, 2012

	# of farms	Value of sales (\$ in thousands)
Blaine	14	2,325
Camas	26	6,586
Cassia	2	Data not published
Gooding	3	1,404
Jerome	3	Data not published
Lincoln	3	Data not published
Minidoka	5	367
Twin Falls	17	2,044

Source: USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2012 Census of Agriculture

Specialty Crops

Idaho is among the top 10 states in the production of specialty crops. The crops in this category are small, primarily in experimental plots of grain and legumes. New varieties of food and oilseed crops are grown here from time to time. The movement towards local food production coincides with increasing awareness of the need for a robust “foodshed” for food security. This has been a factor in increasing the number of small farms and specialty farms in Blaine County. Tree nurseries are also considered to be a specialty crop.

Local and Value Added Products

The County now has local honey, goat milk, chickens, eggs, fruits, vegetables and ancient grains in addition to value-added products such as preserves, granola, kale and veggie chips, and canned goods.



Lettuce - Caroline Woodham



Post Parade, Sheep on the Trail Again - Carol Waller

Ranching

For the purposes of this Plan, the term “ranching” refers to raising and pasturing domestic animals. Ranching is located in the primarily agricultural regions of the County. Cattle and sheep are the predominant species. Often, equestrian facilities are integrated with ranches because horses are still an active part of ranching practices. In addition to providing the economic benefits of ranching, grazing lands can contribute to open space, wildlife habitat and biodiversity.

Ranching occurs on private land and on public lands. Much of the summer grazing occurs on public lands administered by two federal agencies, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the US Forest Service (USFS). The USFS, Ketchum Ranger District, reports that grazing numbers on USFS lands have diminished over the past 20 years. Cattle grazing is being phased out completely and new permits are issued only for sheep grazing. Cattle grazing continues to occur on private and BLM lands, with the strong market trends of the past few seasons fueling an upsurge in cattle numbers. Local ranchers have noted a trend towards raising organic and grass-fed beef and lamb, both locally and regionally. Statistics on sheep and cattle grazing on public lands are found in the Appendix.

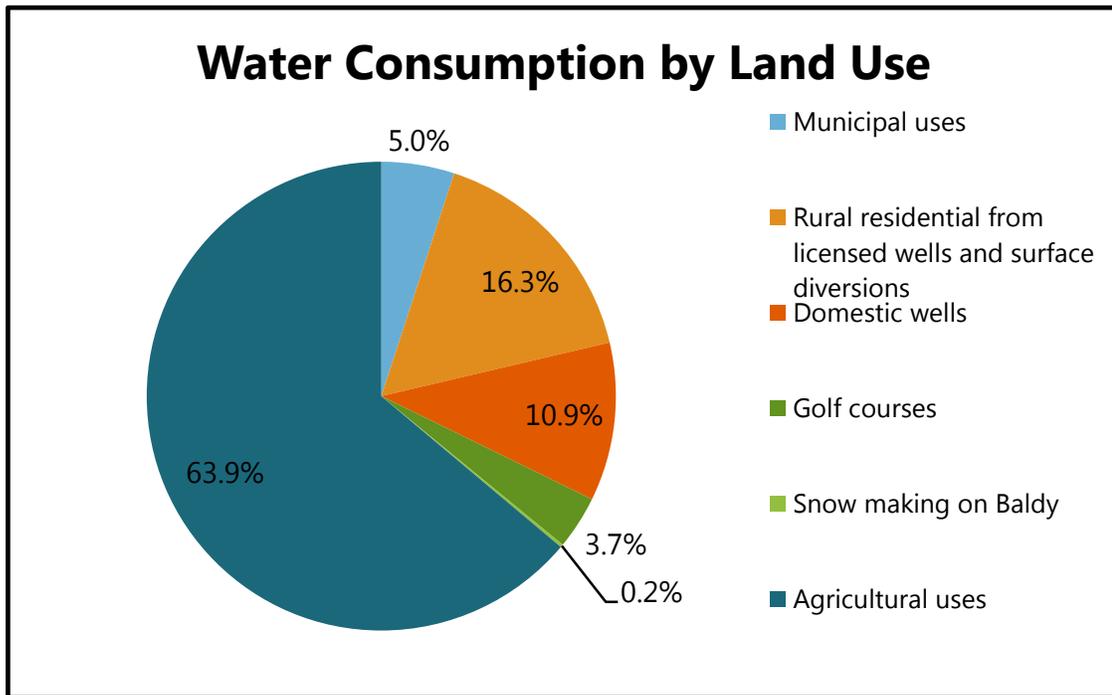
Water Use

The vast majority of the world’s fresh water consumption is for growing food and fiber. Water comes from both surface and groundwater sources. More than 50 percent of the people in the United States, and most people living in rural areas, use groundwater for drinking. In Idaho, 95 percent of potable water comes from groundwater; however, drinking water constitutes only four percent of Idaho's water use.

In Idaho, as nationally, the largest water user overall is agriculture and the largest groundwater use is crop irrigation. Water also is used by industry and for municipal uses, rural residential uses and recreational uses such as golf courses. Power generation,³ is another substantial, but non-consumptive use. The combined total of these uses statewide is nine billion gallons of water per day. Chart 2 shows human water usage by various land use categories in Blaine County. (The Table showing actual acre feet is in the Appendix.)

³ Industry and power generation are large water users on a statewide level, but not in Blaine County.

Chart 2: Blaine County Water Consumption by Land Use Category



Source: Water District 37

Water use is an issue of increasing local concern, as it is throughout the West. South Central Idaho continues to be in a long-term drought cycle and climate change models predict ongoing low precipitation levels. A drought emergency has been declared in Blaine County in 2010 and 2012-2015.

Of the total farmland in Blaine County, 41,930 acres were irrigated via surface and groundwater sources in 2012.⁴ Water is essential to productive, economic agriculture. Because agriculture creates the highest water demand of any user category, the issues of water use and sustaining agriculture go hand-in-hand. The doctrine of "use-it-or-lose-it" may discourage water conservation. Nonetheless, many farmers are seeking actively to increase water use efficiency. To do so, they are replacing and modernizing irrigation equipment and modifying various agronomic and irrigation practices. Technical

and financial assistance is widely available through government agencies, industry and interested non-profit groups. The science and technology of water use efficiency continues to improve. Changing patterns of irrigation do affect groundwater recharge. Managing and conserving water is one of the agricultural community's biggest challenges.

⁴ 2012 Census of Agriculture

A comprehensive, multi-phase, basinwide study of the Wood River Valley aquifer system by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), in collaboration with the Idaho Department of Water Resources (IDWR)⁵, reached several major conclusions. Primary among them is that the Wood River basin aquifer is declining, because groundwater use and outflows have exceeded recharge from precipitation and other inflows in recent years. Among these inflows is seepage from the many irrigation canals and ditches.

The study also notes that ground water and surface water are intimately connected the length of the Big Wood River. The State of Idaho is moving towards conjunctive management: managing surface and groundwater rights under one system. It is anticipated conjunctive management of water in the Big Wood and Little Wood River basins will begin once groundwater models for them are completed, perhaps by 2016. Two new groundwater districts were formed in 2015, encompassing the entire Big Wood River watershed above Magic Reservoir. A third groundwater district exists in the Little Wood River basin. The purpose of groundwater districts is better management of groundwater and helping to mitigate the effects of calls from senior water rights holders.

Much of Blaine County agricultural land has been under irrigation since 1900, with the earliest surface water rights dating to the 1880s. Groundwater extraction by pumping for agriculture did not begin until the 1940s. Under Idaho's doctrine of "first-in-time, first-in-right," conjunctive management will subordinate groundwater rights to surface water rights. Municipal consumptive uses are not exempt. As the study notes, "...rapid population growth since the 1970s has caused concern about the long-term sustainability of the groundwater resource." All water users have a shared stake in its future.

⁵ Cooperatively funded by Blaine County, local municipalities, and non-profit organizations.

The upper basins have been deemed fully appropriated by IDWR since 1980. Other than wells subject to Idaho's domestic use exemption, new consumptive uses of water have not been approved without mitigation since that time. The Appendix contains some common definitions relative to water use. Blaine County's water resources are discussed more fully in Chapter 5, Natural Environment.



Silver Creek –Sarah Gardner

Land Use Regulations and Subdivision Activity

Blaine County currently has two "Productive Agricultural Districts": the A-20 District with a maximum density of one primary residential unit per 20 acres, and the A-40 District with a density of one unit per 40 acres.

While agricultural uses are permitted in all residential zone districts, most occur in Productive Agricultural A-20, A-40 and the Rural Remote (RR-40) Districts, the latter designated on land less suited for farming. Ranching operations are found in many areas zoned RR-40. Map 4.1 shows the Agriculture and Rural Remote zoning districts. The purpose of these districts, as stated in the zoning regulations, can be found in the Appendix.

Table 3: Zoning District Acreage

District	Acres (private land)
A-20	19,028
A-40	69,998
RR-40	183,352

The Blaine County Comprehensive Plan, since 1975, has asserted subdivision activity conflicts with farming and ranching. More lots mean more residential dwellings, and agricultural and residential uses can be incompatible. While Idaho and Blaine County are strong “right-to-farm” jurisdictions, non-farming residents can find agricultural activities irritating. Likewise, agricultural operations can be negatively impacted by trespassing issues, increased non-farm traffic on local roads, loose dogs and other concerns.

Nationally, an estimated 24 million acres of agricultural land has been converted to developed land in the U.S since 1982.⁶ In Blaine County, between 1974 and 2014, at least 55 subdivisions with a total of more than 270 lots have been recorded in the Productive Agriculture zoning districts (see Map 4.3).

While these subdivisions include just over 9,000 acres, one cannot characterize all of those acres as being “converted to developed land.” Roughly 80 percent of these subdivisions continue to be mostly or partially in farm fields. Of greater concern are the challenges of compatibility brought by the additional residential dwellings and the fragmentation of agricultural land created. Fragmentation can disrupt farming operations and also can result in a loss of critical mass needed to sustain businesses supporting agricultural operations. On the positive side, more small farms may introduce food and other crop diversity and related economic benefits, as well as some wildlife

⁶ Farmland Information Center/National Resources Inventory

habitat not present in large mono-crop settings, especially along field borders.

Additional details about this analysis are included in the Appendix. Table 4 shows data on subdivisions on prime agricultural soils as defined by NCRS.

Table 4: Prime Soils and Subdivisions

	Acres
Prime ag soils (in all zoning districts)	143,904
Prime ag soils in A-20 and A-40	44,395
Prime ag soils in A-20 and A-40 subdivisions	4,104
Prime ag soils in CD conservation tracts	900*

*Approximate

The County has taken a variety of steps to manage the impact of subdivision activity in productive farming areas, including the following:

Cluster Developments

Blaine County adopted the first Cluster Development (CD) ordinance in 1996 to preserve larger blocks of farmland and rural open space and allow for more efficient use of land. Clustered lots may be as small as one acre in some zoning districts, leaving the remainder of the land in agriculture. One primary residential unit may be developed as a density bonus within a CD.

The County’s Land Use and Building Services Department records show that of the 31 subdivisions recorded since 1996, about 40 percent have been cluster developments. Most, but not all, took advantage of the density bonus. Map 4.4 shows the location of the CD subdivisions.

Streamlined Property Division

In 2006 the County approved code changes to allow property owners to modify the boundaries of recognized unplatted lots of record simply by deed or survey. This action was taken to facilitate land exchanges between adjacent farm owners for the

purposes of enhancing operational efficiencies and productivity.

The agricultural short plat was adopted in 2009 in response to requests by farm families to be able more easily to subdivide farmland for the purpose of conveying lots to family members.

Blaine County 2025

In 2005, the County initiated a planning process called Blaine County 2025. This process looked at an anticipated growth curve much higher than current projections. Following public input on a variety of implementation scenarios, a preferred scenario was selected. It resulted in several zoning ordinance changes. These included the following:

- Revising county zoning maps to provide clearer distinctions between productive and unproductive agricultural lands.
- Splitting the Productive Agricultural Zone into Productive Agricultural A-20 and A-40 zoning districts. The A-40 Zone District is in productive agricultural areas furthest from urban development. It was created to protect larger operations south of Baseline Road, around Moonstone on the Camas Prairie, in the Little Wood River Valley area, north of Galena summit and in Minidoka.
- Splitting the Unproductive Agricultural Zone Districts into either Rural Residential 10-acre (R-10) or Rural Remote 40-acre (RR-40). These districts include primarily non-irrigable farm and grazing lands, or lands generally too steep for agricultural uses.
- Establishing greater setbacks from wetlands, streams and rivers in new subdivisions in all zones.
- Creating a Transfer of Development Rights Program allowing density to be transferred out of designated A-40 "sending areas" and into designated "receiving areas" deemed suitable for higher density. (The program has not functioned as expected. While some development rights have been transferred

off ag lands, none had been purchased by July 2015. The reasons are unclear, but likely include economic factors associated with the recession and reduced development demand, cost/benefit uncertainty, or location of receiving areas.)



Quigley Canyon – Carol Waller

Conservation Easements

Conservation easements have been important in protecting farm and ranch lands from subdivision activity. Conservation easements are agreements entered into voluntarily between private landowners and nonprofit organizations or government entities. These agreements define allowable and prohibited property uses. Nearly all easements are created in perpetuity. Landowners receive cash payments and/or tax deductions for the value of the easements. Conservation easements on agricultural lands generally include terms to protect water quantity and quality, riparian areas, and wildlife habitat. They occasionally provide for public access.

The GIS Department has calculated that conservation easements have protected 80,264 acres of private land from development, including approximately 15,600 acres (out of 89,027 acres) zoned Productive Agriculture and about 60,300 acres zoned Rural Remote. Most of these easements are funded through USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service.

Land, Water and Wildlife Program

County voters passed a two-year property tax levy in 2008 to protect important land, water and wildlife resources that contribute to our quality of life. The levy raised \$3.4 million and is the first County-level, taxpayer-supported conservation program in the history of Idaho. A voluntary Levy Advisory Board makes recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners about policy and program issues, and projects. The program seeks to leverage the taxpayers' monies by partnering with nonprofits, other government agencies, private landowners and other funding sources.

As of February 2015, \$1.7 million, half of the Levy proceeds, had been spent. Funds went toward:

- conservation of six agricultural properties and associated waterways in the Big and Little Wood River drainages
- native, wildlife-friendly seeding to help restore lands after the 2013 Beaver Creek Fire
- a fish ladder and irrigation by-pass channel on a major tributary to Silver Creek
- a portion of the scenic view along Highway 75 that is also visible from Timmerman Hill
- protection of riparian areas
- protection of wildlife habitat and movement and migration corridors.

Public Access

As noted earlier in this chapter, farmland and ranchland provide habitat for birds and wildlife, including riparian areas, wetland sanctuaries and critical migration corridors. These lands are excellent grounds for hunting and fishing. Much of the public access to these grounds is provided by a program administered by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game called *Access Yes!* This program aims to improve sport access to private land or through private land to public land by compensating willing landowners who provide access. This program

currently has 62,756 acres enrolled in Blaine County, with the majority located in the Little Wood River drainage. *Access Yes!* provides a process to decrease trespassing and unauthorized access across private lands. Both are concerns to farmers and ranchers.

Large agricultural properties often border public lands. The County has sought to preserve or enhance public lands access when these lands have been converted to subdivisions.

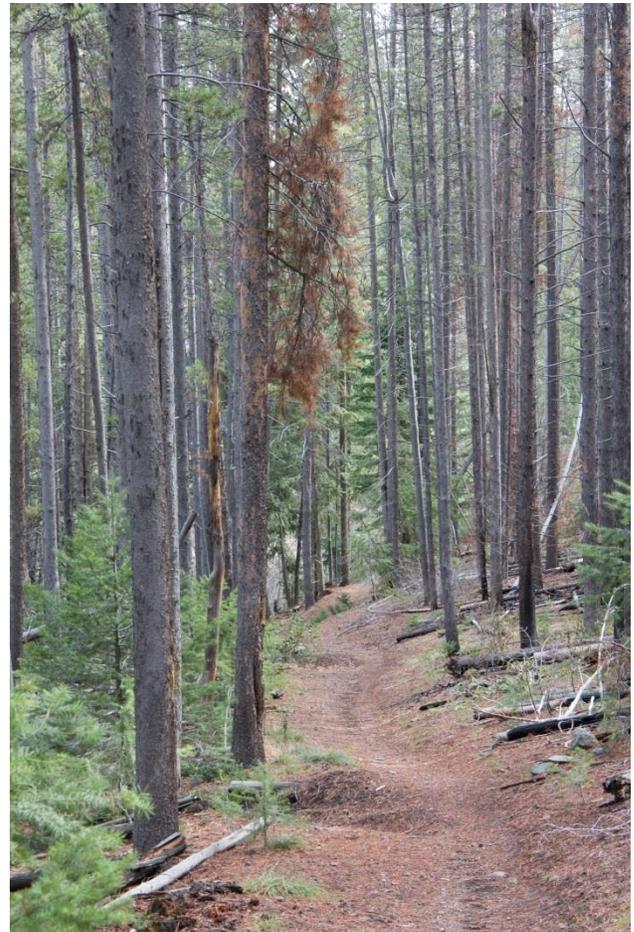


Photo courtesy of Matt Leidecker

National and Regional Agricultural Trends

- Working within a foodshed. The idea of feeding our population within foodsheds and the concept of food security have become topics of national discussion. A foodshed describes a region in which food is produced and consumed, rather than being imported from other areas. Popular methods of distributing food within a foodshed include farmers' markets, roadside produce stands and pick-your-own-produce farms. Growers are investing in demonstration gardens, greenhouses, hydroponic facilities and other methods of local food production. Some approaches are at odds with traditional zoning, and local governments must re-examine regulations to accommodate "farm-to-table" activities.
- Urban agriculture. The American Planning Association defines this as agricultural production in excess of needs for home consumption or educational purposes, as well as distribution and marketing of products within and near urban areas. Examples include community/school/backyard/rooftop gardens, commercial market gardens, community-supported agriculture, and family farms located in metropolitan greenbelts. Counties and cities across the country also are changing zoning laws to allow residents to keep chickens and bees and have gardens in their front yard.
- Farmland preservation programs. Best practices in rural planning have focused on clustering homes and allowing small lots. This is an attempt to make subdivision more compatible with ongoing agricultural practices such as irrigation and water delivery, farming and harvesting, calving and livestock-raising. Programs also include transfers of density, buffers and other tools. The success of these tools has been mixed.
- Scorecards. Many communities are developing a scorecard that sets a current baseline and monitors specific measurable goals. This can



Ketchum Farmers' Market – Kaz Thea

provide facts to enable policy makers to make good land use decisions and facilitate measurement of progress toward meeting goals. A scorecard should include relevant indicators of agricultural sustainability, benchmarks today, and suggested targets for a date 10 to 15 years in the future. Idaho's Treasure Valley, for example, notes a benchmark of 2 percent of locally grown food consumed locally, with a target of 20 percent by 2020.

- Agritourism. Agritourism is broadly defined as tourist-related activities on farms or agricultural lands. Idaho is following the lead of states such as Texas, Utah, and Washington in developing standards, guidelines and incentives for agritourism.
- Use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs).⁷ The increase of GMOs over the past 20 years has focused national attention on a variety of issues. Proponents of GMOs say they increase farm productivity, help eliminate invasive weeds and can aid nutrition. Critics point to the loss of diversity in and corporate control of important food crops, development of pest resistance, potential health issues and a lack of proper labeling and various impacts on adjacent, non-GMO crops. Discussions continue as to the value of consumer labeling, although measures to

⁷ GMOs, or genetically modified organisms, are organisms that have undergone some changes to their DNA through genetic engineering.



Photos courtesy of Poppy Millington

require it have been voted down in Colorado, Washington, Oregon, and California.

- **Food Safety Modernization Act.** New federal requirements for food safety, in particular clean water, affect all growers, including organic and specialty food growers.
- **Industrial agriculture.** Large-scale, corporate farming and livestock raising has resulted in the loss of small farms and farm jobs, loss of crop diversity and lower food prices which threaten small, local farmers. Most small and large farms in Blaine County are still family-owned.
- **Southern Idaho dairy production.** The explosive growth in dairy production in southern Idaho has had positive economic impacts in Blaine County, primarily in the form of steady to higher prices for hay and other feed crops. However, the animal waste from these concentrated feeding operations poses threats to both surface and ground water quality in the region.
- **Loss of pollinators.** Populations of honey bees and other insect pollinators have been declining dramatically. Causes include susceptibility to diseases and contributing stressors like insecticide use, reduced genetic diversity, habitat fragmentation, overgrazing and climate change. Plant pollination by insects is necessary for the majority of agricultural crops and native plants.

Local Agricultural Trends

The following data trends and key topics have been noted over the past two decades:

- **Water scarcity.** Over-allocation, increased irrigation, unsustainable water-use practices, and drought are depleting water resources and affecting agricultural operations. Many are concerned that our water usage is not sustainable over the long term. Predicted changes in precipitation patterns and snowpack may also be significant trends that negatively affect water supply and usage.
- **Local food sourcing.** Blaine County mirrors the nationwide trends. Several entities are taking an active role in creating a locally sustainable foodshed via education and outreach. Local farmers' markets and other programs to help residents buy food grown locally have seen tremendous growth. In Ketchum, farmers' market attendance has grown to 2,000 during peak weeks, with vendor growth from 35 to 65. The Hailey Farmers' Market is also a weekly event, with over 30 vendors. Idaho's Bounty, a food cooperative established locally in 2006, now has over 85 producers and operates in much of southern Idaho. Grocery stores and restaurants are increasingly interested in providing and utilizing local food products. Local produce is now more available than in the past. The incorporated cities have made a variety of changes to their land use regulations to facilitate the production of local food, e.g., allowing the raising of chickens and bees.
- **Agricultural tourism.** Local events such as The Trailing of the Sheep Festival, farmers' markets, and farm-to-table dinners highlight and

celebrate local agriculture and ranching. These events have grown in number and scope, and reinforce other trends and values related to local food production. To date, the county has no lodging-related agritourism. Any proposed agritourism developments could require changes in zoning regulations.

- Decrease in cattle and sheep ranches. Cattle and sheep ranching has declined over the past 20 years, both in terms of the number of operations and the number of animal units managed. Reasons include historically low prices for beef cattle until the past three to five years, new restrictions on access to rangeland used for grazing and competition for land due to the increasing profitability of dairy hay and malt barley crops. In addition, many members of the younger generations are choosing not to continue ranching operations.
- Changing uses of public lands. Related to the decrease in ranching is the shift toward more multiple uses on public lands. The increasing pressure from different sectors to use public lands for recreation or to protect the land from negative environmental impacts contribute to uncertainty for ranchers with grazing allotments.

- Increased protection of farmland. Blaine County 2025 made substantial changes to zoning on agricultural lands as described earlier in this chapter. The goal has been to preserve prime agricultural lands for agricultural uses. In addition, partnerships including the Land Water and Wildlife Program have dramatically increased the use of conservation easements.
- Conservation and habitat development. Awareness of the environmental importance of riparian and wetland areas has grown over the past two decades. Some farmers and ranchers have undertaken extensive stream restoration projects, as well as curtailed agricultural activities, to improve fish and wildlife habitat and conserve natural resources. Awareness of the dire need for specialized pollinator habitat also is growing. Natural resource conservation is covered in more depth in Chapter 5. More topsoil is being conserved as farmers are planting more acres in permanent cover, e.g. perennials like alfalfa, and increase their use of cover crops and "no-till" and "minimum-till" practices.

OUR PAST AT A GLANCE

1994

The 1994 Plan recognizes the distinct character of agriculture and its place in Blaine County's special character. One of its primary objectives is to guide County government in preserving the agricultural community. The Plan sets forth several goals and recommendations, several of which have been met.

1 Evaluate off-site density transfer and development rights transfer.
A voluntary TDR program was established in 2006.

2 Put buyers on notice that agricultural practices such as spraying and all night operations take place.
Standard plat notes addressing this are required on subdivisions near agriculture.

3 Consider allowing agricultural divisions by metes and bounds description without subdivision or survey requirements.
The agricultural short plat and parcel modifications allow flexibility in this regard.

4 Allow agriculture-related businesses in and near agricultural areas under a conditional use permit process.
Ag businesses are defined and allowed by CUP in the productive agriculture zones.

5 Consider agriculture operations and rights with relation to access for fishing, hunting and other recreation.
Not a County program, but "Access Yes!" has become popular in our area.

1975

The 1975 Plan noted that agriculture and recreation formed the economic base of the county. The Plan sought to address the possible compatibility of the two uses in future planning, noting that each requires a high quality environment to remain vital. Although we had not yet entered the decades of our steepest population growth, county leaders already recognized that prime agricultural land was threatened by subdivision developments. The overriding goals were to preserve lands in agricultural use, protect resources essential for continued agricultural production, and discourage development in productive agricultural land.

Key Statistics from the Past	Land in farms / Average size (acres)	Irrigated land	Percentage of farm operators whose primary occupation is farming
1974 Ag Census	261,698 / 1,223	39,039 acres	74%
1992 Ag Census	266,293 / 1,205	64,283 acres	61%
2012 Ag Census	179,130 / 963	41,930 acres	59%



Photo courtesy of Poppy Millington

Challenges

Blaine County faces the following challenges with regard to agriculture. The Desired Outcome(s) that most specifically address each challenge are listed below.

1. Water resources and conjunctive management. In the face of drought, changing precipitation patterns and new development, current water use patterns are unlikely to be sustainable. Where groundwater pumping has supplemented older surface water rights for decades, post-

adjudication conjunctive management of all water rights means that all groundwater use will be vulnerable to senior calls. In response, groundwater users will be forced to reduce pumping or provide acceptable mitigation. This will change irrigation practices, affecting agricultural operations

and the economy. Conserving and managing water is one of the agricultural community's biggest challenges. (Desired Outcomes B-1 through B-9)

2. Climate change. Predictions for the Intermountain West include reduced mountain snowpack levels and earlier spring runoff, affecting both the extent and timing of water available for irrigation. More and hotter wildfires, more invasive species and insect damage to crops are other concerns. (Desired Outcomes A-7, B-1 through B-9, D-6, D-7, E-1 through E-5)
3. Noxious weeds. Fallow land, if left untreated, is highly susceptible to noxious weeds, which spread rapidly. Strategies to fight noxious weeds will become even more important if irrigation is curtailed. (Desired Outcomes A-7, B-9, B-10, D-7, E-4)
4. High barriers to entry and aging populace. The high costs of farming and ranching make it difficult for beginning operators to get started. For newcomers, a tremendous amount of time as well as a large financial commitment is required. The average age of farmers in the County is 58.7 and rising. Who will be the next generation of farmers and ranchers to carry on local agricultural traditions? (Desired Outcomes A-1, C-3, C-6, D-1 through D-9)
5. Maintaining an agricultural workforce. The local agricultural community is having difficulty affording and retaining experienced farm labor. Ranchers face challenges with the federal H-2A visa program for livestock herders. (Desired Outcomes A-1, D-1, D-5, D-6, D-7)
6. Housing needs. While County code allows on-site employee housing in the Productive Agricultural districts, the minimum land area required may not allow enough units for operators with many seasonal employees. Farm families find the subdivision process complicated and expensive. Some have

requested simpler means to convey land to family members for homes of their own. (Desired Outcomes A-1, D-1)

7. Prime farmland pressured by development. Agricultural lands have been fragmented by subdivision, resulting in a loss of critical mass needed for necessary support industries. While development pressure has lessened due to the impacts of the Great Recession, a rebounding economy may bring this issue to the forefront again. (Desired Outcomes A-1, A-3, A-4, A-8, D-2, D-9)
8. Residential encroachment and conflict. Because both agricultural and residential uses are permitted in most county zoning districts, even small farms or a few new residences can create the incompatibilities described in this chapter. In spite of right-to-farm laws and plat notes, complaints can impede agricultural activities. (Desired Outcomes A-1, A-3, A-4, A-8)
9. Community conflicts. Water use, public access and predator management are some of the issues over which the agricultural and non-agricultural communities often do not agree. Policies that address the needs of both can be difficult to achieve. (Desired Outcomes A-3, A-4, A-5, A-6, B-2, B-4, E-2)
10. Fluctuating markets. Farm commodity markets are inconsistent. As crop prices have risen in the period 2008-2015, the values of agricultural lands used in farming and ranching have grown comparable to the prospects for residential development. The uncertainty as to whether this trend will continue is typical of the agricultural economy. (Desired Outcomes A-2, D-1 through D-9)
11. Competition with large industrial agriculture. Centralized industrial produce growers are able to provide products in large quantities and at low prices, making it extremely difficult for local produce farmers to

compete. (Desired Outcomes C-1 through C-6, D-1 through D-9)

12. Production costs. Many production costs have risen, including transportation costs, which have skyrocketed over the past 20 years. Most commodity crops are exported by road and Blaine County is remote from most end-user markets. (Desired Outcomes A-1, D-1 through 9)
13. Infrastructure limitations. Infrastructure for processing (e.g., slaughtering, cleaning and packaging) agricultural products is largely unavailable within or near the County. (Desired Outcomes A-1, C-1 through 6, D-3)
14. Short growing season. Most agricultural lands in the County are in USDA hardiness zone 4 and have fewer than 110 frost free days. In addition, few hours of winter sunlight, cold temperatures, snow load and wind limit the feasibility of polytunnels and similar inexpensive structures used to extend the growing season. (Desired Outcome A-1, D-3)
15. Harnessing geothermal resources. Geothermal energy could provide additional growing seasons for a variety of specialty crops. Research and investment will be needed to harness these resources. (Desired Outcomes C-5, D-3)
16. Bringing back insect pollinators. While insects are not required for pollination of barley and most other local commodity crops, pollinators are essential for local produce and seed production and for crop diversity and native plants in general. Ways to bring back pollinator populations, improve and expand pollinator habitat must be found. (Desired Outcome E-5)
17. Soil erosion and loss. Land tilled using conventional methods is highly susceptible to the loss of fertile topsoil caused by wind and water erosion. Drought may exacerbate

this problem. More farmers each year are turning to practices proven to reduce topsoil loss and even enhance soil fertility. (Desired Outcomes B-6, B-9, B-10, E-1, E-4)

18. Clean water laws. Federal food safety requirements present costly challenges for local food producers. While local water quality is high, most irrigation distribution systems, especially for surface water, fail to meet federal standards for growing produce commercially. This requires farmers to sanitize water both before applying it to crops in the field and in the handling process. (Desired Outcome B-5)
19. Accommodating agritourism. County zoning may not support some elements of agritourism found in other regions such as guest lodging, on-site dining and roadside retail outlets for locally-produced goods. On-site lodging and dining facilities may complement hunting and fishing activities in and around some agricultural areas. (Desired Outcome A-1, A-2, D-9)
20. Complex grant processes. Many of the grants available to farmers involve complex and time-consuming processes and require extensive documentation. This leaves many busy farmers less likely to apply. (Desired Outcomes D-1, D-6)



Photo courtesy of Robin Englehardt



Chicks – Poppy Millington

Desired Outcomes

Desired outcomes are the intended result of our planning efforts. Each desired outcome includes several active policy statements that will guide future decision-making.

A. Land Use and Prime Farmland

Desired Outcome: prime farmland protected for agricultural use and regulations that ensure that agriculture remains viable.

- A-1: Work proactively to review and modify land use regulations to 1) reflect the changing needs of farmers and ranchers, and 2) reduce conflicts between farming activities and non-farm uses. Issues that need further examination include, but are not limited to, these:
- Adjunct agricultural business needs such as local food stands and other uses that support local food production.
 - Regulations on ag-related processing infrastructure and businesses.
 - Commercial composting in appropriate locations.
 - Use of seasonal structures such as polytunnels, which also are known as high tunnels, hoop greenhouses, or similar season-extending infrastructure.
 - Regulations governing employee housing on farms and ranches, including seasonal employee housing.

- Revitalize the Transfer of Development Rights program by re-examining receiving zones and other potential improvements.
 - Review and monitor the Cluster Development process. Review and revise the standards as needed to make cluster development more successful at retaining farmland, especially if cumulative impacts to farming and ranching activities are identified. Continue to evaluate benefits and detriments of Cluster Developments.
 - Review and revise subdivision ordinances, processes and standards recognizing the countywide values associated with productive agriculture, the needs of the agricultural community, and the potential conflicts associated with residential development.
 - Consider additional ordinance provisions to adequately regulate Confined/Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs).
- A-2: Recognize the value of agritourism as an emerging trend and economic resource. Review associated regulations. This includes lodging and amenities related to hunting and fishing on farm and ranch lands.
- A-3: Educate the community regarding the needs and potential impacts of agriculture including topics such as traffic, dust, agricultural materials storage, animal noise and smells, lights, and farm equipment activities.
- A-4: Reduce potential conflicts with non-motorized recreational uses such as bicycle traffic and with unauthorized access on or across farms and ranches by hunters and anglers.
- A-5: Support programs that provide for legal public access on to private lands, such as *Access Yes!*
- A-6: Create forums for community dialogue on predator issues that affect farmers and ranchers. Continue to encourage non-lethal practices in predator management.
- A-7: Continue or increase funding for programs that address noxious weed abatement, improved and increased cover crops and other methods of assisting farmers and ranchers in noxious weed control.
- A-8: Continue to place a high priority on conservation programs that permanently protect agricultural lands and prime agricultural soils from development.
- A-9: Continue the County's support of the University of Idaho Extension office and programs, which can help to achieve several of the Desired Outcomes for this chapter.

B. Water Use

Desired Outcome: programs and policies that recognize the critical need for water for agricultural uses and help to ensure adequate water for agriculture into the future through conservation and careful use.

- B-1: Continue to support studies that provide a complete analysis of surface and groundwater use with goals of eliminating overconsumption and balancing water use.
- B-2: Support processes that facilitate communication between large water users, municipal and other small water users so that different users can share information regarding water allocation and water consumption. Promote better education for all water users.
- B-3: Prioritize programs and funding to help conserve and recharge irrigation water or explore crop varieties that use less water. Seek incentives that promote efficiency in water use.

- B-4: Support the formation of water districts as a governance method that will facilitate the most efficient and fair use of water.
- B-5: Support the exploration of alternative water delivery methods or quality-control procedures to help local food producers meet federal clean water requirements for crops grown for human consumption.
- B-6: Support programs that help farmers retain soil moisture, build up soil organic matter and prevent erosion. Examples are conservation tillage, nutrient management, and the use of crop rotations.
- B-7: Support drought-preparedness and mitigation through appropriate technologies, including use of remote sensing, local weather forecasting, drought-tolerant crops, early warning information systems, improved irrigation technologies based on plant needs through evapo-transpiration, fertilization techniques, methods to measure soil moisture, and other means to increase the resilience of our farming communities.
- B-8: Promote partnerships between farmers and scientists to develop new water-reduction technologies, as well as land and water management tools.
- B-9: Promote the implementation of cover crops where temporary fallowing occurs.
- B-10: Support and incentivize restoration of permanently fallowed land to return it to wildlife habitat or sagebrush steppe where feasible.
- B-11: Encourage legislation to help strike a balance between existing Idaho state water law and necessary water conservation at the local level.
- B-12: Consider participating in a precipitation enhancement program based on established research, such as the South Central Idaho Precipitation Enhancement Strategy.

C. Local Food

Desired Outcome: land use regulations, tax structure and other programs that recognize the great value of a strong local foodshed.

- C-1: Support local farmers' markets, farm-to-table operations, outlets that sell local foods, and other efforts that advance the local foodshed. Educate the community on the benefits of buying local, even at higher costs.
- C-2: Re-evaluate land use regulations as outlined above in A-1 to ensure that local food producers are supported in growing, harvesting and delivering local food as economically as possible.
- C-3: Facilitate collaboration between local food producers and other agricultural operators to help utilize prime farmland efficiently and take advantage of acreage that may not otherwise be utilized.
- C-4: Evaluate the County's own food purchasing policies and buy locally whenever possible as a means of supporting local producers.
- C-5: Support the expanded use of geothermal resources for agricultural purposes such as heating of greenhouses.
- C-6: Support an Idaho "cottage food law" allowing chefs, bakers, and farmers' market vendors to prepare foods in home or farm kitchens to sell directly to consumers.
- C-7: Use information gained from the 2015 Community Food Assessment to explore additional ways to promote local food production.

D. Economics

Desired Outcome: support for farm and ranch operators, both large and small, who are recognized for their important direct and indirect contributions to the local economy.

- D-1: Support programs that help farmers recruit and maintain employees.
- D-2: Continue support for the agricultural property tax exemption as a key policy tool in support of the agricultural economy.
- D-3: Consider solutions for the infrastructure needs of agriculture, such as well-regulated facilities addressing the production of value added products and extending the growing season.
- D-4: Support educational opportunities for the general public and school-age children such as 4-H programs, programs in local schools and opportunities for children to be “hands-on” with local agriculture.
- D-5: Support ongoing professional development for farmers and ranchers relative to best practices, water use, available funding opportunities and other current issues. Make information on the County’s agriculture-related regulations readily available.
- D-6: Encourage the use of pilot projects, demonstration plots and “train-the-trainers” programs that will result in wider dissemination of knowledge.
- D-7: Recognize and support the needs of organic and specialty crop farmers, a growing segment of the agricultural economy.
- D-8: Support agritourism and other non-traditional ag-related enterprises in appropriate locations and scale to support economic sustainability.

E. Resiliency

Desired Outcome: adaptability, sustainability and economic resiliency for farming and ranching.

- E-1: Support sustainable agricultural practices.
- E-2: Recognize that climate change could have a great impact on agricultural practices. Stay abreast of climate change data and adaptability practices to address climate change threats proactively.
- E-3: Recognize the strong interrelationship of agriculture, the environment and recreation. Support efforts that advance mutual goals.
- E-4: Support efforts to bring new technologies such as water-use efficiencies, conservation efforts and GPS precision irrigation to farming and ranching practices.
- E-5: Support diversified farming and the use of best management practices (BMPs) in livestock management, integrated crop management, integrated pest management and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) practices. All of these support healthy agricultural landscapes. Support additional best management practices to protect the watershed, soil and natural systems and to reduce soil loss and erosion.
- E-6: Encourage broader awareness of insect pollinators, their contribution to the agricultural economy and their needs in terms of health and habitat. Understand the relationship between pollinators and the insecticides regularly used in the County. Seek ways to promote integrated pest

management. Work with other agencies and groups to provide local educational programs and identify opportunities to increase and improve pollinator habitat. Consider pilot programs such as utilizing County roadside ditches as pollinator corridors.



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