

Linda Engle Introduction: Sustainable Idaho is brought to you by the Portneuf Resource Council.

Madison Long Introduction: Welcome to Sustainable Idaho. I'm your host Madison Long and today I talked with Doug Finkleberg, an extension educator in cropping systems for the University of Idaho and co-team lead for the Innovative Agriculture and Marketing Partnership Grant.

The I. A. M. P, or IAMP grant is a five-year program under the United States Department of Agriculture. In 2024, University of Idaho began incentivizing 200 Idaho farmers statewide to experiment with creative marketing strategies and practices that benefited soil conservation. In April 2025, however, the USDA terminated the grant based on new criteria to place greater emphasis on helping farmers access market opportunities.

Doug Finkleberg: With the change in administrations, there was a change in focus where research priorities should be and where grant funding should go. They allowed us the opportunity to reapply, and although it took about a year, we were re-awarded the funding under new terms and conditions.

The original award was \$54 million which was at the time the largest grant the University of Idaho had ever received. Shortly before we were paused, we received another \$5 million for the grant process, so that brings that total up to \$59 million. Of that, \$38 million is budgeted to go directly into producers pockets.

ML: What other changes had to be made in order to re-secure the grant?

DF: The USDA identified as a changed priority that at least 65% of the award needed to go directly to producers from the primary awardee, which is the University of Idaho. We'd set things up under a different structure where we had funds going to partner organizations that work directly with producers and then they would pass those funds through incentive payments directly to producers. In the previous iteration, we were at 55, 54% to producers, so we pivoted from more of a research emphasis to satisfy the new program requirements with more of a marketing emphasis. Each producer that receives a contract to implement practices will be eligible to receive a \$7,500 yearly payment to pursue marketing activities. That could be building their own brand, going to a conference where they might network and find additional outlets for their specific identity preserved products that are raised under our funded practices.

ML: According to the Innovative Agriculture and Marketing Partnership website, financial incentives average approximately \$60 per acre, depending on the crop and practice. Eligible commodities include barley, beef, chickpeas, hops, potatoes, sugar beets, and wheat. A University of Idaho article states that farmers adopting practices within these commodities are focused on improving soil health and will be documenting the data from their projects to help other producers make informed decisions about regenerative farming practices.

What challenges did you face during this budget and proposal reapplication process?

DF: One challenge was the longest government shutdown that we'd experienced to date, which put a lot of people on the sidelines that were working really hard to unpause the program. We had to make hard decisions about where to allocate funds because we're a research institution and we had to pivot away. We still have research at the long-term sites, looking at regenerative, soil carbon sequestering, soil organic matter building practices,

practices that create more biodiversity below and above ground. Although it won't be as robust as it was originally.

ML: Despite the project's termination, the University of Idaho did not receive an extension on the grant's five year term, leaving them in a compressed timeline to work with the original pool of producers, rather than taking more applications.

The goals of the University of Idaho's research team focuses on strengthening crops, land and water use in agriculture and conserving natural resources. How do these relate to the goals of the IAMP project?

DF: There are market signals that suggest that end consumers would like to have more sustainably raised products and we're trying to help the producer capture that value and not have it lost through all the intermediaries. The way this is set up, if we succeed there'll be a win-win.

Producers will have third-party independently verified information about the relative benefits of these production practices to similar farms as theirs, which takes the risk out of adopting something new. If there's information out there suggesting what challenges that they can look forward to, the general public will benefit from a food supply that is less variable. A farmer is looking at a list of different opportunities rather than just the local elevator. I know that some of the producers we've been in discussions with are very excited to use their marketing incentive payment to capture nutrient density data and have that as a tool they can use to market their crop, to find a higher price point for their potatoes. If we do our job right, we will see benefits across multiple tiers within our communities. That's our hope, that's our intention.

ML: More specifically, what sustainable practices does the IAMP grant help farmers adopt?

DF: Strictly from an agronomic standpoint, these practices all support either more efficiently using fertilizer or building soil organic matter. The practices we're incentivizing are conservation crop rotation, interseeding, no tillage or lesser tillage, biochar application, putting cover crops in between cash crops, and prescribed grazing. While we are not specifically trying to limit pesticide use in one way or another, practices we're incentivizing will benefit pollinators, will benefit insects generally, increase biodiversity. This is not a grant that is specifically focused on irrigation or water use. However, every 1% of increase in organic matter, replacing synthetic nitrogen with compost or manure, is about an inch of water holding capacity. You are building resiliency to drought and water stress into your soil.

ML: Several partners assist the IAMP team by providing grazing expertise, incentivizing cover crops, monitoring crop verification, working in more areas of the state, and providing marketing analysis.

While this grant is focused on environmental stewardship, that in itself can tie into boosting long-term economic success. How does the Innovative Agriculture and Marketing Partnership grant create that balance for the producers involved?

DF: Our producers cannot try to farm better if they can't stay in the farming game. They have to be profitable in order to keep going. The joining of these incentivized practices that help build resilience on the farmscape with the opportunity to access new markets, to find new outlets and avenues for their farm products, there's real opportunity for another win-win. We hope that long after our incentivization goes away, that they'll have seen value in doing things in a way that's more sustainable, that builds their soil rather than mines it, that means that the next generation are going to have a better tool to work with. If we have healthier soil on the landscape, then we're going to have healthier people living on that soil.

ML Outro: Thank you to Doug Finkleberg for sharing how the Innovative Agriculture and Marketing Partnership grant is helping Idaho farmers adopt conservation practices while creating new economic opportunities to the benefit of the farmers and public of Idaho. To learn more about the project and its partners, visit kisu.org/sustainableidaho.

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