

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

Madison Long: Welcome to Sustainable Idaho. I'm your host Madison Long and today I talked with Brad Johnson, a conservation farmer and the Regenerative Agriculture Senior Advisor of the Nature Conservancy. Taken from their website, "the Nature Conservancy is a global conservation group working to create a world where people and nature can thrive." They have three main priorities: tackle climate change, protect the ocean, land, and fresh water, and provide communities with food and water.

Focusing on their third priority, the Nature Conservancy is collaborating with Minico High School students to use donated farmland to learn regenerative agriculture practices. The Rupert high school unveiled their newest ag building earlier this year, equipped with classrooms, labs, and a welding shop to provide students with hands-on learning experiences in ag-related fields. This building was developed to address the need of their still-growing Future Farmers of America, or FFA, program, which is one of the largest programs in the state.

When I caught up with Johnson, he spoke to me during his pause in farmwork, answering my questions while in the tractor. So, could you tell us why the Nature Conservancy wanted to get involved in this project?

Brad Johnson: Well, regenerative agriculture is a new suite of farm practices that involves new methods, new tools. Tools meaning soil and plant nutrition monitoring, soil and plant quality, health quality monitoring. We felt it was important to start teaching the younger generation about these things we can do on the farm that will help them grow high-quality crops. But also, we'll reach more farmers this way, because as those kids that are involved in it go home with their families and they're talking about what they're doing on the Minico farm, we're hoping that that farmer starts to ask some questions about us, and we can reach out. We're thinking it can scale this up a bit and change more farm production in the state.

ML: What exactly did your side of this project look like?

BJ: Budgets are tight. They were gifted this farm and irrigation equipment. They maybe didn't have the budget to run a full farm, and we saw it as an opportunity to influence the farming practices out there. Our plan was to provide funding for that farm, and then what we're getting out of it is the regenerative piece and the education.

ML: In a 2021 study done by the University of Idaho, agriculture was recorded as responsible for 42% of the jobs and 59% of total sales in the Magic Valley. This area includes Cassia, Gooding, Jerome, Lincoln, Twin Falls, and Minidoka counties – where Rupert is located. In a wider look at Idaho's agribusiness, currently farmland accounts for around 11.5 million acres, with over 22,000 total farms.

How does this project align with the Nature Conservancy's broader mission in Idaho and the Magic Valley area?

BJ: My mission within the Nature Conservancy in Idaho is to promote regenerative ag practices in the state. This is really a good means for me to do that. I feel like we're getting enough attention around this, enough publicity that I think the word's going to get out that we are here to help. We're a good organization that values agriculture, and we are a good resource for regenerative ag practices.

ML: Why is it important to connect conservation efforts with agricultural education in high school?

BJ: For years, research and all the data coming back, centered around which chemical, which fungicide we can use, how much fertilizer we need to add to these crops. And with regenerative agriculture, we're letting the soil biology take care of that for us. So, we have to reduce or even sometimes eliminate fungicides and insecticides so that we can help soil biology thrive, and that in turn helps feed those plants. We're not organic by any means. We still add some fertilizers, and we still spray the weeds. This is enough of a different way of farming that getting that education in early is key because all of the information coming out to farmers, whether it's from the university, chemical companies, or even private research farms, it's all centered around chemical agriculture, and we're promoting biological agriculture. It's super important to get into the younger generation and start that thought process early.

ML: Johnson explained that students will be exposed to conservation and sustainability topics such as how to minimize soil and wind erosion, how to plant cover crops to keep a living root in the soil and promote biological agriculture, the adoption of carbon sequestration, and producing nutrient dense foods.

BJ: I think this regenerative ag that we're teaching these kids 100% supports production agriculture. It's nothing that will harm or take away from production agriculture. We are teaching them how to basically, for lack of a better cliché, ramp production agriculture up to the next level.

ML: How do you plan to measure the impact of this sustainability education over time?

BJ: We're still figuring that one out. We've had some questions being asked by parents already on the production practices. I think that one metric is just word of mouth. It's not a great one, but we will have them do field days and actually teach what they're learning to attendees whether those are other farmers, or their parents, or teachers. I think we can kind of gauge how much they're learning through what they're speaking about.

ML: What crop are they planting right now?

BJ: This year was the first growing season. It was potatoes this year that had no fungicides on them, no insecticides and no fumigation and reduced fertilizer input. McCaine's offered them the same contract for those potatoes. Next year will be sweet corn, and they're actually going to sell

sweet corn on a roadside stand at the high school. I'm not sure what the crop will be in year three.

ML: The company, McCaine Foods that Johnson refers to, is a Toronto frozen potato manufacturer that has a plant in Burley, a city adjacent to Rupert. Johnson continued by sharing that in terms of response from the local community, it has been positive. Students have expressed their gratitude for the new ag-building as a whole and how this is pushing them to think about future careers. And according to a KMVT interview of one Junior, Lexi Anderson, the four-acre farm was entirely managed, budgeted, and taken care of by the students.

BJ: From what I gather, they're super excited about it. They're having fun with it. I think they're learning a lot. I feel like they're pretty positive about it.

ML: What advice would you give to other schools or communities looking to build similar partnerships with conservation organizations like the Nature Conservancy?

BJ: Just think outside the box, have a plan of what you'd like to do and reach out to us. I think we would entertain the idea of partnering with a few more high schools, as long as our budget can allow it. I think my role will just be support, whether that's financial support and advisement if they have any questions on how to do things. I would hope in the future that we are recognized within state FFA, if they have the state programs where kids are taking care of acres for their FFA project. I would hope that sometimes some of those students reach out to us and they manage those acres in this way and need some advice on that.

ML Outro: Thank you to Brad Johnson for sharing a little more about the Nature Conservancy's contribution to the new Minico High School farm management program where students will focus on reducing tillage of the field, keeping a living root, building soil armor and diversity, and potentially integrating animals into their fields to increase nutrient cycling. To learn more about the Nature Conservancy and what they do, go to www.nature.org. See you next time!

ML: We have two announcements. Aaron Menenberg from Renewable Northwest will be speaking about Idaho's Energy Future. The public is invited to the talk at Goody's from 6 to 8 pm on Wednesday October 22.

Second, Bannock County is asking for public input on the new solar, wind, and nuclear ordinance. There is an open house Thursday October 23 from 5 to 7 pm at the Planning & Development Office, 5500 S 5th Ave, Pocatello.

L Outro: Funding for our Sustainable Idaho Student Hosts is provided in part by this radio station, the ISU Center for Ecological Research and Education, and the Sagebrush Steppe Landtrust through the ISU Career Path Internship Program. Direction, funding, and additional support is provided by the Portneuf Resource Council.