

Linda Intro: 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 this is the first episode in a three-part series discussing Idaho's Senate Joint Memorial #104 and its potential impact on the Camas National Wildlife Refuge. Today I talked with Friends of Camas representatives Zoe Jorgensen, the board chairperson, and Jessica McDermott, the board secretary.

Zoe Jorgensen: I am Zoe Jorgensen.

Jessica McDermott: I'm Jessica McDermott.

ML: The Camas National Wildlife Refuge is almost 11,000 acres of rural area close to Hamer, ID with a noted 300 identified species of birds. Started in 1937 by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the refuge operates as a breeding grounds for migratory water birds and other wildlife. As part of the National Refuge Complex in Idaho, Camas National Wildlife Refuge is a community spot known for its hiking and biking trails, as well as the Camas Creek which seasonally provides water for agriculture, wildlife, and recreation. According to the Idaho Legislature website, Senate Joint Memorial #104 was introduced March 12, 2025 with a request to the federal government for an expedited permitting process to clean Camas Creek. As of now, the SJM #104 has passed in both the Idaho House and Senate and is on route to be considered by the U.S. Legislative Branch. Part of the memorial is interested in transferring ownership to the state of Idaho. So who currently oversees the operations at the Camas National Wildlife Refuge?

JM: That's the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff because it is a federal public land. These are people who we work closely with as the Friends group. The Friends of Camas, we really try to help foster environmental education, conservation, and scientific study for the benefit of not only the refuge, and the resources, and wildlife there, but also for public enjoyment. We are a registered 501c3, so an official non-profit. We work closely with the staff who actually care for and steward the refuge.

ML: What is the issue surrounding the Senate Joint Memorial 104?

ZJ: Basically, the Senate Joint Memorial came out and publicly announced that they wanted Idaho to take over the management of the refuge. It suggested that the management practices were to blame for all the water right issues of everybody downstream from us. Basically, the whole world, whole nation, all of Idaho, is in major hydrology changing. Some of that has come through with different problems with irrigation all the way downstream. The people in the Mud Lake area are seeing a different pattern in their water. And so Burtenshaw, being from that area, proposed this memorial, but he stated it was because of Camas' mismanagement of the water and that they weren't doing everything they could to make sure that all the water flows. And truly they are.

ML: Jorgensen mentioned Senator Van Burtenshaw, the senator backing the bill. Clark Corbin of Idaho Capital Sun has quoted Senator Burtenshaw during the bill's debate saying the creek has become obstructed by the buildup of willows and sediment, preventing water usage in the Mud Lake area. This might require a cleaning, and possible dredging to remove sediments and debris, as well as prevent flooding. However, dredging can cause sediment disruption, release contaminants into the water, and change natural water flow and erosion patterns.

How could state ownership impact the Camas National Wildlife Refuge as a whole?

ZJ: It could mean absolutely no changes, and it could mean absolutely every change. With the state being able to make the decisions instead of having to answer to the National Wildlife Refuge System, which monitors all of the refuges in the United States, the state could be very easily persuaded to sell off parts and the water rights get sold with the land. They could leave it for public use or they could chop it up and make housing out of it. The Senate Joint Memorial is a suggestion, it leaves it open to interpretation to whoever makes those decisions in the future of what's going to be happening. One big influence is the Shoshone-Bannock tribes do have treaty rights on the refuge and they would forfeit those rights if it went to state. Once it gets out of the national nexus, the tribal rights are then lost. So what's going to become of this, we're just hanging in the air.

JM: It seems like whether Burtenshaw was aware of it or not, he's kicked a hornet's nest with this joint memorial. It's unclear what exactly will happen. I don't know why he put this forward at this exact moment in time, but we do know that there was no public input or collaboration or an attempt to meet with Fish and Wildlife Service staff at the refuge to actually solve any of the purported issues. So altogether, it's a very dangerous request in our opinion.

ML: According to the Idaho Conservation League website, The SJM #104 reflects concerns from farmers about the management of Camas National Wildlife Refuge. Can you tell me more about this?

JM: I haven't heard of any actual comments from farmers. What I know is that Senator Burtenshaw and his family own a lot of acreage in Mud Lake and they are farmers and he's the one who sponsored the joint memorial. I've not read or heard comments from other farmers or irrigators stating there's an issue. And this memorial is focused on Camas Creek, but what's strange is the wording only goes back nine years. But this choice to only look at the last nine years of water on the refuge ignores drought years, 2014 to 2015, when the creek sometimes did and didn't make it onto the refuge.

ML: According to Burtenshaw, and as cited in Cody Roberts' Post Register article, about 170,000 acre-feet of surface water from the Centennial Mountains traveled into the refuge's canal system over the last nine years. However, only around 28,000 acre-feet made it down to Mud Lake, resulting in a net loss of around 14,000 acre-feet. Because of this loss, local water users in Mud Lake had to pay almost one million extra dollars for water.

ZJ: I know in the past, there's been an agreement with Mud Lake that when the irrigators come to talk to the previous manager if there was a blockage of debris or if we needed to remove a few things, they have worked on it together. But there has been no conversation in several years over the flow of the creek. So if there is an issue that they feel that the landowners downstream has, it's not been communicated back to Camas Creek.

ML: What alternatives are the Friends of Camas seeking out instead of this bill?

JM: The Friends of Camas have put out two official statements on SJM 104, and we said in our very first statement that the path forward is actually working together. It's Senator Burtenshaw doing his duty as a statesman, speaking with these groups, getting public input, and if he and irrigators feel there is an issue, as stated in our statement, the Friends group is happy to collaborate and meet with him at the refuge to walk the creek for him to point out where he feels there is an issue, but we've received no response up to this point.

ML: Thank you to Zoe Jorgensen and Jessica McDermott for spreading awareness about the SJM #104 and its potential impact on the Camas National Wildlife Refuge. If you're interested in more information about SJM #104, the Friends of Camas posts updates on their Instagram and Facebook. We will also be talking with other representatives involved with this issue to find out more.

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