

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 Brittany Brand, the Director of the Resilience Institute. In 2018, the Climate and Hazard Resilience Institute started as a collaboration between Boise State University faculty, students, and partners to tackle pressing hazard and climate related challenges. Their area of work first focused on understanding risks and strengthening preparedness for wildfires, floods, earthquakes. Then, in 2025, the group underwent a name change to the Resilience Institute to center resilience as a unifying and forward-looking framework.

BB: We quickly realized that we cannot have community resilience if we don't have resilient people living in those communities. There was no way to do the work we were doing without expanding a much broader range of topics. Our mission is that we partner with communities to listen deeply, plan collaboratively, and translate science into trusted, actionable solutions that build lasting resilience.

ML: What does that mission look like in practice when you work with Idaho communities?

BB: We always start with listening, with relationship and trust building. When we are introduced to a community, the first thing we do is visit, we ask about how long folks have lived there, what they love about it, what their concerns are. And we talk a little bit about who we are as well, but the focus is mostly on getting to know them, their values, their culture, their concerns. It's kind of a snowball approach because a lot of times when we start talking to folks, they start introducing us to other folks that they want us to talk to and it just builds out from there. Once we have a pretty good foundation, that's when we start saying, what would you like to do together? We co-develop projects, do a resilience assessment where we identify their strengths and their challenges, and then bring the most advanced, innovative tools, cutting-edge research to address some of their challenges.

ML: In developing a strategic plan, the Resilience Institute creates a student and mentor program with expertise in economics, public policy, environmental science, and geoscience to bring the correct knowledge needed for the specific Idaho community and region. One current example includes the Idaho West Central Mountains Region, where a Building Community Resilience VIP course is working with citizens and students to balance conservation, public planning, sustainable economic growth, and population well-being.

What do you see as Idaho's biggest challenges over the next decade, and how are you helping build resilience to address them?

BB: We're growing rapidly across the state. A lot of it's happening in unincorporated areas, away from infrastructure. When growth occurs in this way, we have the growth pressures and infrastructure strain without the tax base to upgrade that infrastructure. This patchwork growth starts to infringe on our values as Idahoans. Our open space, our ag land is starting to be compromised. It leads to potential for environmental degradation with groundwater withdrawal, with individual septic systems for home rather than hooking into centralized infrastructure. This combination can lead to economic instability because a lot of our state is based on natural resources and ecotourism, can lead to weakened capacity of communities to actually address the climate shifting across Idaho, seeing more drought, more wildfire.

However, when you think of resilience, if you can address it holistically, if we can identify and prioritize within individual communities, across a region, across the state, then we have the

ability to think system-wide about how our decisions today influence not only the safety and the vitality of our communities today, but also into the future.

ML: With forests, recreation, and agricultural rangelands covering 94% of Idaho's land, according to a 2022 University of Idaho report, protecting the natural environment remains one of the major research pillars of the Resilience Institute. How does protecting these natural ecosystems contribute to stronger, more resilient communities?

BB: When I think about protecting our ecosystem, I'm thinking about a lot of different things. I'm thinking about our mountains, trees, wilderness areas, air, clean water, the sustainability of agriculture, of ranching, of sustaining our culture and values as Idahoans. Protecting our environment is key to our economic sustainability long-term. The more we can protect our environment, the healthier we're going to be as humans and the more we'll be able to prepare for, respond to, and recover from those natural hazard events.

ML: According to the Idaho Department of Labor's 2025 Profile of Rural Idaho, thirty-five of our 44 counties are considered rural, with populations under 20,000 citizens. Rural communities often face challenges like workplace shortages, aging demographics, infrastructure gaps, or increased costs. Indeed, the KFF, an independent, research nonprofit, reports that 98.2% of Idaho is designated as a Primary Care Health Professional Shortage area.

BB: As academics, we have expertise in these different areas in urban planning or in hazard science, but we rely on them to help us, to teach us, and then we can work collaboratively to solve some of our most pressing real world challenges.

ML: The Resilience Institute also develops decision support platforms such as the fully launched Valley County Hazard and Risk Tool and the in-progress Idaho Resilience Tool. These programs take data needed for decision making, hazard mitigation, or planning that is fragmented across water, health, environmental, and academic agencies into one in-depth location.

BB: An unexpected outcome of the Valley County Hazard and Risk Tool is that because it's so well designed, planners and emergency managers was our target audience, but the population uses it during wildfire evacuation events. Its first summer of launch, over a two-month time frame, it had more than 25,000 hits in a community with 10,000 people.

ML: What gives you optimism when you think about the future of resilience in these communities?

BB: When we started working in the West Central Mountains region, we started to hear that their biggest challenge was around unmanaged growth. And there was just this deep contention between different groups across that region that were really concerned about environmental conservation, preserving ag land, and about open space. What we heard was that everybody actually wanted the same thing. They just wanted it for different reasons. They weren't able to come to the table and hear that. As we built our relationships, we became a trusted neutral platform. Once we finished that resilience assessment, we were able to bring all of those groups together into a room, people that have not gotten along for their entire lives, and say, let's talk about this.

And it was that moment where the energy in the room shifted. There was this sense of urgency, sense of purpose like this is our chance. They created a shared vision, and when you bring people together in this way, we can make something real happen. The work we do, the work the communities are doing, is going to lead to a stronger economy, stronger environmental conservation, and ultimately stronger resilience in Idaho.

ML Outro: Thank you to Brittany Brand from the Resilience Institute for sharing more about their work within communities through building relationships, co-creating data-informed solutions, and guiding change related to the natural environment, hazards, infrastructure, economy, and the health and well-being of Idaho's citizens. For more information on their work, visit our website, kisu.edu/sustainableidaho.

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