

# impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

## Restoring Idaho streams program benefits landowners

### AT A GLANCE

Idaho landowners who have a stream often want it to be as stable and healthy as possible. Streams can be restored to improve fish/wildlife habitat and replenish groundwater critical for wells and crops.

### The Situation

Historically, meandering streams were commonly straightened and moved to the side of broad, flat valleys to drain valley soil earlier in the year and make farming easier. Over time, however, landowners throughout Idaho watched streams cut deep into the earth and start eroding their land. During high water, increased water velocity scours the bed and banks. The water moves quickly so little of it replenishes the soil and groundwater. The stream then goes dry in the summer and loses its fish. Dried out soils stress crops and increases fire danger. Down-valley, some water wells go dry in the summer as the water table drops below their reach.

### Our Response

Starting in 2015, University of Idaho Extension Forestry and Water Outreach programs teamed up with experts on restoring streams and protecting property from erosion. Experts include field scientists, grant writers and project managers from organizations like Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Soil-Water Conservation Districts, Fish and Wildlife Service, local land trusts and others. Each representative provides landowners with information about available financial and technical resources. The workshop is



Afternoon tour of a restoration project called the Mason Project, Phase 1 and 2, in Latah County near Deary, Idaho.

co-taught by UI Extension educators and the local agency representatives. It starts with a half day in the classroom followed by an afternoon touring two or more private landscapes in various stages of restoration.

### Program Outcomes

UI Extension has provided the workshop to all of Idaho's five panhandle counties, plus Latah County. 172 participants have taken the workshop. As a result of the program, participants' knowledge about stream restoration increased from an average of 2.1 to 3.7 on a scale of one to five. Eighty-six percent of the participants indicated they would regularly monitor or assess their stream for problems. 78% indicated they would improve the health of one or more of their streams.

And 71% indicated they would work with professionals to help with enhancing their stream. These practices include adding stream bank stabilization or habitat improvements learned in the workshop.

But even more compelling than these numbers is the story of one couple who attended the 2019 Latah County edition of Restoring Idaho Streams. The Robertsons, Brian and Pam, had been thinking about bringing water back to their parched meadow-turned hayfield for more than a decade. Their stream had eroded 12 feet deep across their property. It was basically a straight, steep ditch with no habitat or water much of the year. The 2019 workshop spurred them into action. Armed with their newfound information, they worked closely with NRCS and other agencies to find funding and technical help to restore their stream and meadow to how it functioned before the mid-1800s. In the four years after the 2019 workshop, their field became a wildlife haven and started storing water again. The Robertsons measured the depth of the water table after the restoration. Their previously dry hand pump well now had water less than 8 feet below ground level. As they learned from a revegetation specialist, “If you don’t have water on your land, you have nothing.” Anyone can watch their amazing journey in a ~10-minute video they produced about their project: <https://vimeo.com/808897225>.

Restoring Idaho Streams returned to Latah County in 2023, as did the Robertsons. We invited them to describe their journey to a restored stream and meadow. They inspired others to consider restoring their own land and stream. While the afternoon field tour visited another, larger and more complex restoration project, we were only one ridge away from their project, and could get a sense of what their land looked like.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

**Jim Ekins**, Area Water Educator • University of Idaho Extension, Kootenai County • 208-292-1287 • [jekins@uidaho.edu](mailto:jekins@uidaho.edu)

**Chris Schnepf**, Area Forestry Educator • University of Idaho Extension, Kootenai County • 208-292-1288 • [cschnepf@uidaho.edu](mailto:cschnepf@uidaho.edu)

60-23-jekins-streams-program • 10/23

There are a handful of take-aways for Restoring Idaho Streams participants:

- Working lands can also have healthy, functioning streams that provide fish and wildlife habitat and protect the bank and adjacent farmland.
- Anyone can plant willows to protect the banks, shade the stream and provide wildlife habitat.
- Stream restoration projects often require permitting and sometimes engineering assistance. But experts can assist willing landowners with permitting, engineering and funding.
- Even if a stream was straightened or moved decades ago, it can be restored to a functioning hydrology.

### The Future

Restoring Idaho Streams will be scheduled for every north Idaho county in the coming years, hopefully including Clearwater and Benewah counties in 2024. University of Idaho Extension is also planning to work with the instructional partners to produce an educational video. The video will provide abbreviated workshop information for free, any time.

### Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

- University of Idaho Extension
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Soil and Water Conservation Districts
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Palouse and Kaniksu Land Trusts and Inland Land Conservancy
- Idaho Dept. of Environmental Quality
- Coeur d’Alene Tribe Natural Resources Dept.