UI RESEARCH & EXTENSION—Budget cuts while supporting Ag—Idaho’s top industry

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THE UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO’S STATEWIDE SYSTEM of research and extension (R&E) centers continues to provide the state’s agricultural producers with research and information needed to help keep agriculture—Idaho’s biggest economic sector—thriving.

The way the system operates some 15 locations throughout Idaho continues to evolve, said Donn Thill, assistant director of the Idaho Agricultural Experiment Station at Moscow, with oversight of all R&E centers. State cuts in 2009 and 2010 to the Agricultural Research and Extension Service budget led to major changes at three centers, Parma, Tetonia and Sandpoint.

Tetonia R&E Center now operates as a research farm with supervision provided from Idaho Falls and Thill in Moscow. To cut labor and other costs, its operations now use less than a third of nearly 600 acres. Tetonia now gets support from Idaho’s barley, potato, and wheat commissions because of the station’s importance to their growers. Operations are suspended at the Sandpoint R&E Center while a community task force considers possible future uses.

Parma R&E Center provides the most optimistic example of that evolution. Parma’s importance to Idaho’s No. 1 industry led Simplot, the Treasure Valley Agricultural Coalition, and fruit growers to contribute some $400,000 a year to the station’s operations in 2010. J.R. Simplot Co. held a field day in June to feature its research for representatives from 17 nations. The Simplot field day focused on its own research plus that of SFP, an industry partner.

In addition to the $300,000/year five-year Simplot commitment, fruit growers are contributing $30,000 annually for five years, and the Treasure Valley Agricultural Coalition contributed $65,000 in 2010 and 2011. Statewide, R&E centers are increasing their efficiency. “We’re actively changing our operations to match available funding,” Thill said. “We try to make changes that do as little damage as possible to our core missions.”

“The foundation for our advances starts at these UI research centers,” Simplot agronomy manager Terry Tindall said in June at Parma. “The Simplot Company depends very much on third party, independent researchers like those at the University of Idaho to help support, direct, and provide validation for its science-based agricultural research.”

R&E field days help growers stay current

FIELD DAYS PROVIDE AN IMPORTANT LINK between University of Idaho Research & Extension Centers and the public who benefit from their research.

Last July, Fremont County Extension educator Lance Ellis at Ashton pioneered a grain tour to help growers learn more about long-established field trials in the upper Snake River country. The timing was right. Grain prices were strong and the tour attracted 45 participants, many of them growers. “You need to go where the people are,” Ellis said.

Rather than being simply a rotation crop intended to support potato production, wheat and barley promise profits to growers. “They wanted to know about the new varieties and how they’re performing,” Ellis added. The tour complemented the established Ashton Grain School held each February.

Some field days focus on specific topics ranging from Moscow’s annual weed science tour to Parma’s ultra-popular fruit day that draws hundreds who literally get to bite into potential new niche crops for Idaho.

Others, notably the Kimberly Twilight Tour, cover the research spectrum. The Kimberly event transforms a July evening into a carnival of science with information about everything from potato storage to weeds to aquaculture and beef quality. A free dinner and horse-drawn wagon rides lend a festive atmosphere.

DID YOU KNOW?

1,331

RECORD NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURAL AND LIFE SCIENCES IN FALL 2010.

Source: UI CALS Academic Programs