

S. 1343 – Idaho Working Lands Fund Act

Frequently Asked Questions

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Why are working lands important to all Idahoans? Idaho's working forests, ranches, and farms sustain Idaho's food production, the heritage of local communities, habitat for fish and wildlife, intact watersheds for clean water, and opportunities to hunt, fish and enjoy the outdoors.

Working lands are vital to Idaho's economy. Agricultural production contributes more than \$4 billion to the state's economy every year. Many working lands provide access as well as habitat for fish and wildlife that sustain Idaho's recreation economy, which amounts to approximately \$2.2 billion annually in retail sales and services.

How would S. 1343 protect working lands? This bill would establish the Working Lands Fund in the state treasury. The fund would provide voluntary grants to landowners and project sponsors to:

1. Promote stewardship of natural resources;
2. Protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and native plants; and
3. Provide for recreational opportunities, including but not limited to hunting, fishing, and access to public lands.

How much will this cost? The Working Lands Fund is authorized to receive *future* legislative appropriations once the State's fiscal situation improves. No appropriation is requested this year. The bill also allows the Fund to accept private donations and other contributions.

Why act now? Enacting S. 1343 allows the State to lay the foundation for a well-designed grant program before funds are requested.

Who will administer the Fund? The Fund would be administered by a nine-member committee appointed by the governor. The committee would be comprised of agency representatives and stakeholders from forestry, agriculture, ranching, conservation and sporting groups. The committee would operate the grant program based upon an assessment of need and strategic plan. The members would serve without compensation except for reimbursement of actual and necessary expenses. For administrative purposes, the committee would be housed at the Office of Species Conservation.

How can the Legislature know that funds will go to worthwhile projects? The bill directs the committee to develop a strategic plan setting forth specific criteria and priorities for use of the Working Lands Fund. This will give future Legislatures a clear idea of what the Fund will accomplish before State funding is requested.

Will the Fund complement other natural resource stewardship efforts? Yes. Grants awarded from the Working Lands Fund can be used to help project sponsors meet match requirements from wide range of programs administered by State agencies and the Natural

Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). For instance, the NRCS' Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, aimed at preserving prime soils for agricultural production, requires a 25% cash match. Meeting match requirements is often the most difficult aspect of completing land and wildlife conservation projects.

S. 1343 ensures that project sponsors will look for a variety of other funding sources to "leverage" grants from the Working Lands Fund. The bill provides that no more than one half of the cost of any project will come from the Fund.

Why should this bill pass? Passing this legislation would establish State policy to safeguard the contribution that working lands make to Idaho's cultural, economic, and natural heritage for future generations. The bill takes positive action on an issue voters clearly care about, without affecting the budget in difficult times. S. 1343 ensures that specific priorities and criteria for use of the Fund will be established when the Legislature acts on future funding proposals.

Prepared by: Idaho Working Lands Coalition
Contact: Suzi Budge
850-3065