

Final Meeting Record

Kootenai Valley Resource Initiative (KVRI) Hybrid Board Meeting

Boundary County Annex Building

April 21, 2025, 6:00 p.m.

Board Members in Attendance:

Ben Robertson, Boundary County Commissioner & KVRI Co-Chair
Carson Watkins, Idaho Fish and Game (IDFG)
Chuck Roady, Landowner/ Industrial
Dave Gray, Social/Cultural/Historical
Dave Bobbitt (IDFG)
Ed Atkins, Corporate Agriculture / Landowner
Gary Aitken Jr., Kootenai Tribe of Idaho (KTOI) & KVRI Co-Chair
Genny Hoyle, Conservationist / Environmentalist
Lee Colson, Social/Cultural/Historical
Remington Daniels, Business/ Industry
Rick Alonzo, Mayor of Bonners Ferry & KVRI Co-Chair
Tim Bertling, Boundary County Commissioner

Others in Attendance:

Austin Terrell, Governor's Office of Species Conservation (OSC)
Caleb Davis, U.S. Representative Fulcher's Office
Chris Bachman, Yaak Valley Forest Council
Eddie Whitcomb, Idaho Fish and Wildlife Service)
John O'Connor, Citizen
Keegan Bordeaux, KTOI
Michelle Richman, Idaho Department of Water Resources
Morgan Pfander, IDFG
Rob Morris, IDFG
Shelby Therrian, KTOI
Theresa Wheat, KTOI & KVRI Facilitator
Todd Higen, Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ)

- **Welcome and Introductions** were led by Gary Aitken Jr. at 6:00 p.m. to begin the meeting.
- **Presentations:**

Austin Terrell, OSC, who serves as the Terrestrial Species Project Manager at the Sandpoint office, provided an update on conflict prevention initiatives and the Carcass Pickup Program. He emphasized the importance of staying connected with stakeholders to discuss available resources aimed at reducing human-wildlife conflicts, particularly those involving grizzly bears and wolves.

During the 2024 legislative session, the Idaho Legislature passed House Bill 592, which established dedicated funding to support both livestock loss compensation and conflict prevention efforts related to large carnivores. The creation of this fund reflects a growing recognition by the state that additional resources and support are needed to mitigate conflicts and compensate livestock producers more effectively.

Historically, these programs were supported through an annual federal grant. However, as federal funding declined over the years, there was less and less money, than no money available for conflict prevention in one fiscal year.

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House Bill 592 addresses this gap by allocating \$225,000 annually to the Office of Species Conservation, with funding administered through the Idaho State Department of Agriculture. The Department is responsible for establishing the rules and overseeing the financial management of the program. OSC is tasked with implementation of the program on the ground.

Under the current framework, confirmed livestock losses are submitted to the Boise office for review. With this new funding in place, it is expected that producers will have access to more robust financial support. Furthermore, the flexibility afforded by this additional funding may allow for expanded coverage beyond strictly confirmed losses, providing greater support for producers dealing with predator-related impacts.

The financial framework provides a total of \$225,000 per fiscal year to support livestock loss compensation and conflict prevention efforts related to wolf and grizzly bear interactions. However, the bill does include a limitation: funds may only be used for issues directly related to livestock and livestock feed. As a result, the program does not extend financial support for damages or prevention efforts on general farm ground not used for livestock production.

Of this total, \$150,000 is allocated annually to compensate for confirmed, probable, and possible losses attributed to wolves and grizzly bears. OSC continues to apply for federal grant funding specifically for wolf-related depredation, with the goal of covering all wolf losses through federal dollars. In turn, this would allow the state-allocated funds to be used exclusively for grizzly bear related losses. Fortunately, due to low depredation rates in 2024, unspent funds can be rolled over and are available for use in the next fiscal year.

The remaining \$75,000 per year is designated for conflict prevention initiatives involving wolves and grizzly bears. This portion of the funding can be carried over from the previous fiscal years, increasing the resources available for proactive measures.

One notable aspect of the legislation is that it does not define the parameters of "conflict prevention," which allows for flexibility in designing and implementing strategies that are effective and practical for livestock producers. This adaptability enables stakeholders to tailor prevention methods based on local needs and outcomes.

Last fall, OSC launched a pilot Conflict Prevention Cost-share Program, which is currently under active development. The program is aimed at supporting livestock producers in Bonner and Boundary Counties, as well as areas near the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, in implementing effective deterrents to reduce bear-livestock conflicts.

The program operates on a 50/50 cost-share model, providing funding support for proven conflict prevention tools such as; electric fencing and mats, livestock guardian dogs and their feed, range riders, and other field-tested deterrent methods.

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Under the current model, OSC supplies and pays for all materials, while producers contribute their 50% match through labor and installation. For example, OSC's largest project to date is a 10-acre electric fencing installation in Boundary County, which involved approximately \$6,000 in materials. Producers installed the posts, and OSC completed the project by returning to install the fencing wire.

In total, there are currently seven active projects in North Idaho, primarily electric fencing initiatives with a few involving guardian dogs.

To support youth involved in agricultural programs, OSC has waived the match requirement for Future Farmers of America (FFA) students and 4-H participants. These youth participants may receive full funding (100% cost coverage) for fencing or other deterrent projects, allowing them to hire professional fencing services without any out-of-pocket expenses. This ensures equitable access to conflict prevention resources for the next generation of livestock producers.

As of now, \$23,000 remains in the combined budget for the current and upcoming fiscal year, due to OSC's decision to merge the two years of funding because of delayed implementation in FY25 as a result of the rulemaking process. Additionally, \$52,000 has been earmarked for projects in Eastern Idaho, where eight producers with confirmed livestock losses were invited to apply for assistance. From the original state allocation, approximately \$23,000 remains available. OSC also maintains a strong partnership with the Safari Club International Foundation, which has previously provided valuable assets such as a carcass pickup trailer and a new education trailer. This year, the Foundation has pledged an additional \$30,000 in support of the conflict prevention program. Combined, OSC expects to have approximately \$53,000 available through June of next year to implement on-the-ground prevention efforts.

OSC is working toward a more structured and efficient application process for the Fiscal Year 2027 program cycle. Applications will no longer be accepted on a first-come, first-served basis due to the challenge of prioritizing projects. The application window is anticipated to open in October and close in February. To enhance transparency and ensure fair evaluation, a review committee comprised of local residents and agency representatives will assess all submitted applications to determine funding priorities.

Additionally, the program is transitioning from a direct delivery model to a reimbursement-based approach. This change is intended to accelerate project timelines and improve overall efficiency. Under the updated structure—modeled similarly to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs, OSC will reimburse producers based on unit costs (e.g., per foot of electric fence or mat). Producers will be responsible for purchasing and installing the materials, after which OSC officials will assist with the installation of electric wiring and process reimbursements.

For more information about the service or the application process, please contact Austin Terrell, OSC, Austin.terrell@osc.idaho.gov or (208) 571 – 2052.

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The Carcass Pickup Program, now in its second year of operation, has proven to be a valuable resource for Boundary County residents. Designed to assist livestock owners with the safe and confidential removal of deceased animals from their property, the program is provided at no cost to residents.

Through an established agreement with the Boundary County Landfill, the OSC and Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) ensures that all carcasses are properly and responsibly disposed. The service is especially in demand during calving season and the colder months, and typically takes between 5 to 10 minutes per pickup, depending on equipment availability (e.g., tractor vs. winch use).

In its first year, the program far exceeded expectations with 23 animals versus 10 projected pickups, more than double the initial prediction. Carcasses collected included cows, horses, calves, pigs, one goat, and one sheep. The program continues to grow in awareness and utilization, with 13 pickups already recorded in the current year, indicating strong momentum and community interest.

Looking ahead, OSC and IDFG aim to evolve the program into a more sustainable model, inspired by Montana's Carcass Composting Initiative. The long-term vision includes converting collected carcasses into usable compost, which could then be returned to the community or repurposed for use in local infrastructure projects such as road work. However, this expansion will require additional time, planning, and funding.

The Carcass Pickup Program reflects OSC and IDFG's commitment to community service, environmental responsibility, and continuous improvement in agricultural support initiatives.

Rob Morris, IDFG, now in his third year as a Wildlife Conflict Specialist, has served in an eight-month seasonal position limited to 1,385 hours annually. However, due to the growing success of the Carcass Pickup Program, he was able to continue working year-round last year to provide additional support for its operations.

The primary focus of his position is human-wildlife conflict management, particularly responding to incidents where livestock are at risk due to bear activity. In addition to fieldwork, they have made significant strides in public outreach and education, helping to build awareness and preparedness in the community.

A key milestone in this effort was the acquisition of a fully customized education trailer, purchased by Safari Club International and built by Double R Trailers in Nampa, Idaho. The trailer features a fully functional electric awning to protect information tables in inclement weather, as well as custom doors and signage under development to enhance mobility and ease of setup for school visits and community events. The Idaho Fish and Wildlife Foundation also contributed a \$2,500 grant to fund the trailer wrap, further enhancing its visibility and professionalism.

The trailer is scheduled to debut at the Bonners Ferry Farmers Market on Saturday, April 26, 2025 marking its first public appearance. Additionally, a \$3,000 grant application has been submitted to the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee to further support the education initiative. Although the funds are currently held at the Federal level, there is optimism that they will be released soon.

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Thanks in part to a relatively low-conflict year in 2024, the team was able to expand its outreach efforts, participating in 45 events across five counties in North Idaho and making contact with over 4,500 individuals. Topics included bear awareness, species identification, and general safety practices.

For 2025, 29 events are currently scheduled, with the goal of increasing that number throughout the year. A highlight event, the annual Bear Fair is scheduled for September 27, 2025, and will be held in Sandpoint, Idaho, to attract broader participation from the surrounding regions, including Priest Lake. These efforts reflect a proactive approach to wildlife conflict mitigation and public education, ensuring that residents are informed and prepared to coexist safely with local wildlife.

Morgan Pfander, IDFG, new full-time Grizzly Bear Biologist, has a primary focus on reducing human-bear conflict, along with community education and outreach. One of the key areas of concern centers on the ongoing issue of fruit trees attracting bears, a situation that, while not yet a major issue in some parts of Idaho, has become more frequent over time.

This pattern has been observed in other regions, such as Ashton in Southern Idaho, where grizzly bears began venturing into town and foraging on fruit trees. In response, IDFG organized volunteers for an annual apple-picking event aimed at removing bear attractants and keeping wildlife out of residential areas. This successful effort has since inspired other programs aimed at early intervention and long-term prevention.

While Boundary County hasn't reached the levels of conflict seen in places like Missoula, Montana, the potential exists. As a preventative step, the biologist and team have begun outreach to local vendors that sell fruit trees. IDFG has created educational materials, including informational tags that are now being attached to fruit trees sold in Bonners Ferry, Sandpoint, Clark Fork, and soon Priest River. These materials are designed to raise awareness among new residents and long-time landowners alike about the risks of bear attractants.

For property owners concerned about wildlife interference, electric fencing is being promoted as a practical solution. Recognizing that many people are unfamiliar with electric fencing or may find it intimidating to install, a support program is currently in development. This initiative will include the rental of equipment such as fruit pickers, tree ladders, pruning saws, and other tools that will assist residents in managing their fruit trees more effectively.

In the long term, the program aims to expand its reach by collaborating with additional vendors and community organizations, building a network of local support and action. Though the program is still in the final stages of development, wider public outreach will begin once all resources and partnerships are fully in place. This initiative reflects a proactive approach to wildlife management, reducing attractants before they become a larger issue, and empowering the community to be part of the solution.

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- **Legislative Updates:**

Carson Watkins, IDFG, explained that the IDFG Commission recently adopted big game seasons for 2026-2027 seasons. Many of the hunting season changes related to the Boundary County area are related to minimizing the prevalence and spread of Chronic Wasting Disease. General elk seasons remain similar to past years with the exception of general season rifle cow opportunity which was removed from the B-tag. To address chronic wasting disease, 1,000 extra doe tags and 100 buck tags were added to the CWD management zones. These changes aim to reduce deer density and buck-to-doe ratios. Applications for these hunts open next month. Additionally, the first wolf trapping season is under a new, shorter structure has ended, resulting in several wolf mortalities. IDFG is working through alternative approaches that will help to supplement wolf mortality going forward and to manage the wolf population toward to the statewide objective.

Dave Bobbitt, IDFG, stated that a working group effort to review advanced technology in big game (ungulate) hunting recently concluded. The group made recommendations to the IDFG Commission related to guiding principles for addressing future technologies and regulation of existing technologies that did not meet the group's standard for fair chase. Based on working group feedback and voting record, along with public input, the Commission moved to advance negotiated rulemaking related to regulating several hunting equipment technologies to include night vision, infrared, transmitting trail cameras, and drones among others. Commissioner Bobbitt commented that long range shooting was a topic covered in-depth by the working group, but no clear consensus nor recommendations came from those deliberations. Lastly, the Commission is advancing the necessary work to implement a draw type system for allocating nonresident general season deer and elk tags. Ideally, this system will be used to allocate tags for the 2026 hunting season. Goals of this approach are to enhance fairness in tag distribution and reduce system abuse.

Lee Colson, Board Member, invited everyone to come to the Snyder Guard Station on May 3, 2025 from 10:00 – 3:00 p.m. for their open house, free of charge.

- **Regular Subcommittees:**

Forestry Sub-Committee: A field trip is scheduled for May 28, 2025 with more details to follow. A grant-supported project is underway to develop a video and social media shorts and will include brief Q&A from the videographers to the field trip presenters. This is intended to not only support the video, but provide good information about fuel reduction projects. The next meeting is scheduled for June 11, 2025 at 11:00 a.m. located at the Boundary County Annex.

Grizzly Bear Sub-Committee: The Bear Fair is scheduled for September 27, 2025 located in Sandpoint, more details to follow. The next meeting is scheduled for July 24, 2025 at 10:00 a.m. located at the Boundary County Annex.

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TMDL Sub-Committee: The next meeting is scheduled for October 15, 2025 at 10:00 a.m. located at the Boundary County Annex.

Todd Higns, IDEQ, explained that at the April 10, 2025 meeting, attendees received an update on the ongoing investigation into elevated selenium levels in the Kootenai River. The project, currently in the data collection phase, involves monitoring around 3-4 Kootenai River sites and all tributaries to identify the source of contamination. While natural geology is a possible cause, the goal is to confirm or rule it out. The multi-year study is supported by a pending EPA grant. Once enough data is gathered, Idaho DEQ will determine next steps, which may include partnering with Montana on a joint TMDL plan or working with the EPA on a binational agreement. IDEQ is also monitoring for nickel and nitrate, potentially linked to Canadian mining operations. The International Joint Commission remains actively involved, with IDEQ leading the state's role in the process.

Next Meeting is scheduled for May 19, 2025 at 6:00 p.m. located at the Boundary County Annex.

Meeting Ended at 7:20 p.m.

Meeting Recorded by Jada Fairchild