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## Senator Cook's Weekly Update 3/24 -3/28

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WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

April 2nd, 2025

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## This past week...

Here's a look at what's been happening at the Capitol this week:

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## SB 1181 – Strengthening Idaho's Public Defense System

[\(Click here for more bill information\)](#)

On Monday, I voted in support of Senate Bill 1181, which passed unanimously. This bill builds on Idaho's transition from county-based public defense to a statewide system. This creates a more uniform, efficient system while protecting our constitutional rights.



### What this bill does:

- **Statewide Facilities Transition Plan:** By 2027, the State Public Defender's office will have a plan for shifting from counties providing office space to using state-owned or state-leased facilities, which will ease the burden on counties.
- **Transparency and Oversight:** The bill requires detailed reports on contracts and expenditures to track the effectiveness and cost efficiency of public defense services.
- **Clarification on Transcript Payments:** Clarifies that the State Public Defender covers transcript costs in applicable cases, aligning with court rulings.
- **Improved Public Defense Standards:** Adopts a standard to ensure attorneys have reasonable caseloads, adequate resources, and the independence necessary to provide strong representation.
- **Fair Compensation:** Contracts will reflect local market rates, recognizing cost-of-living differences across Idaho.

### Why This Matters

Public defense is not just a legal obligation; it is a moral responsibility. Everyone deserves a fair representation, regardless of financial status. This bill helps maintain a fair and functional justice system, reflecting the collaborative efforts of the Governor's Office, the State Public Defender, county officials, and frontline attorneys.

### Looking Ahead

Next, I'll present **Senate Bill 1202**, which provides the necessary financial support to the implementation of Senate Bill 1181. While the budget is higher than anticipated, creating a challenge, I'm committed to ensuring Idaho's public defense system remains fully funded and effective.

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## Wildfire Safety and Responsible Utility Management: Introducing the Wildfire Standard of Care Act

[\(Click here for more bill information\)](#)

The Senate recently passed Senate Bill 1183, known as the Wildfire Standard of Care Act. This legislation is a proactive and balanced solution that will help prevent devastating wildfires while ensuring we maintain reliable and affordable electricity.



### Why This Matters

In recent years, catastrophic wildfires have caused significant harm across the western United States. Utilities in other states have faced financial ruin, resulting in skyrocketing electric bills for their customers. Idaho's small and rural electric cooperatives would be especially vulnerable in such circumstances.

The Wildfire Standard of Care Act is designed to protect Idaho from suffering the same fate. By establishing clear standards and empowering our Idaho Public Utilities Commission (IPUC) to oversee utility wildfire mitigation plans, we can ensure that utilities are actively reducing the risk of wildfire.

### What This Bill Does

The legislation achieves its goals through several key measures:

1. **Establishing Wildfire Mitigation Plans:** Utilities must develop and implement strategies to reduce fire risks.
2. **Idaho Public Utilities Commission (IPUC) Oversight:** The IPUC will review, approve, or reject plans, ensuring they meet rigorous safety standards.
3. **Accountability:** If a wildfire does occur, utilities will be held liable based on their adherence to their approved plans and actual conduct. This rebuttable presumption standard means utilities can defend themselves by demonstrating they followed their plans responsibly.
4. **Collaboration with Forestry Experts:** The bill requires the State Forester to provide input on vegetation management strategies to ensure effective and

informed mitigation efforts.

5. **Transparency:** Utilities must notify counties, fire protection districts, and timber protection associations within five business days of submitting a plan, promoting transparency and collaboration.

## The Path to Compromise

This bill is the result of months of hard work by a diverse group of stakeholders including: utility companies, government agencies, fire protection professionals, and even groups with initial concerns. While not every party is fully satisfied, the vast majority now support or remain neutral on the bill – a testament to the cooperative spirit that made this legislation possible.

## Fiscal Responsibility

The Wildfire Standard of Care Act is not only proactive but also financially prudent. Implementing this oversight requires two additional full-time positions within the IPUC, costing \$187,400 annually. However, this cost will be covered by utilities through fees and assessments – not taxpayer dollars.

### Protecting Our Future

By proactively addressing wildfire risks, **SB 1183 safeguards lives, property, and our state's natural beauty** while preventing the financial fallout seen in other states. Idahoans deserve safe, reliable electricity, and this bill helps secure that future.

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## Standing Up for Idaho's High-Needs Students: Why House Bill 291 Mattered



[\(Click here for more bill information\)](#)

During the recent session, I supported House Bill 291, a crucial but ultimately unsuccessful effort to create the Idaho High-Needs Student Fund. While the bill did not pass, its intent remains important:

ensuring schools receive financial support for students with severe disabilities, whose education costs often exceed \$15,000 per year.

## The Challenge

Idaho is one of only two states without a dedicated fund for these high-cost cases, forcing school districts to cover expenses using local funds. This leads to strained budgets, fewer resources for other students, and increased reliance on property taxes.

## Real Impact on Schools

In one of the districts I represent, a student who is deaf requires a full-time American Sign Language interpreter, which costs \$55,000 per year. Another student with severe behavioral challenges needs two behavioral interventionists, totaling \$49,800 annually. Yet another student requires occupational therapy, speech therapy, a behavioral interventionist, and specialized assistive communication devices, bringing the total cost to over \$65,000 per year.

These are not hypothetical scenarios — these are real students facing real challenges, and our school districts are doing their best to meet those needs without sufficient support.

## How the Fund Would Have Worked

House Bill 291 proposed a transparent and accountable system to ensure funds were used responsibly. Here's how it would have functioned:

- Schools cover the first **\$15,000 per student**.
- The state reimburses **100% of the next \$50,000**.
- Additional costs (up to \$100,000) are **80% reimbursed**.
- No district could receive more than **5% of the total fund** to ensure fairness.
- Schools must exhaust other funding sources (Medicaid, private insurance) before applying.

The fund would have been financed through a \$3 million appropriation in the Governor's FY 2026 K-12 budget.

## The Broader Impact

House Bill 291 was not about creating new spending — it was about relieving local taxpayers of an unfair burden. School districts are already paying these costs, and without this bill, they will continue to pull from general funds, reducing resources for all students. Additionally, when districts lack funds for high-needs students, they face increased legal risks from potential lawsuits for failing to meet federal requirements.

This bill represented a commitment to fairness, equity, and the belief that every child, no matter their abilities, deserves access to a quality education.

## Moving Forward

This bill was about fairness, equity, and ensuring every child gets the education they deserve. While I am disappointed that House Bill 291 did not pass, I remain dedicated to advocating for our students, our schools, and our communities. I will continue to work with my colleagues to find practical solutions that provide relief to districts and ensure all children receive the education they deserve.

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# A Win for Idaho Taxpayers: House Bill 381 Passes Unanimously

[\(Click here for more bill information\)](#)

Great news! House Bill 381 passed the Senate unanimously (35-0), ensuring Idaho taxpayers are treated fairly during audits.



## What Does House Bill 381 Do?

House Bill 381 is a straightforward but impactful piece of legislation. It guarantees that if you're audited by the Idaho State Tax Commission, you can use your credit card statements or bank statements as proof of your expenses. Requires the Idaho State Tax Commission to inform taxpayers of this right.

## Why This Matters

Before this bill, many Idahoans were unaware that they could use these everyday financial documents as legitimate evidence. Without that knowledge, defending themselves in a tax audit became unnecessarily difficult and intimidating.

House Bill 381 changes that by providing clear, written protections for taxpayers. By making this right explicit and ensuring that the Tax Commission communicates it, the bill brings greater fairness and transparency to the auditing process.

## A Team Effort

I want to extend my sincere gratitude to Senator Den Hartog for presenting this bill on the Senate floor and advocating for Idaho taxpayers.

Now that it has passed both chambers, House Bill 381 heads to the Governor's desk for signature. I'm optimistic he will sign it into law, officially strengthening taxpayer rights across our great state.

## Standing Up for Idahoans

This is what responsible governance looks like. Our job as legislators is to ensure that our government remains accountable and that every Idahoan is treated fairly. House Bill 381 reflects our commitment to these principles.

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## Protecting Idaho's Animal Rescues from Unfair Taxation



## LEGISLATION

[\(Click here for more bill information\)](#)

House Bill 263aaS (as amended in the Senate), passed the Senate unanimously (35-0), ensuring that animal rescue and adoption fees remain exempt from Idaho's sales and use tax.



## Why This Matters

Idaho traditionally taxes products, not services. For years, adoption fees from shelters and nonprofits were rightly classified as service fees, covering care, feeding, housing, and transportation for rescued animals.

However, the Idaho Tax Commission recently attempted to redefine these fees as taxable sales, creating an unnecessary financial burden on rescues and adopters. House Bill 263 clarifies that adoption and rescue fees have always been – and remain – tax-exempt service fees.

## What the Bill Does

The bill explicitly states that fees charged by 501(c)(3) nonprofits or local governments for adopting or rescuing animals are not taxable sales. These fees cover necessary costs and have never been subject to taxation.

## The Impact

This decision has a tangible impact on Idaho communities:

- **Animal Rescues Stay Afloat:** Nonprofits operate on tight budgets; this prevents unnecessary taxation and financial strain.
- **Adoption Remains Affordable:** Removing the risk of added taxes keeps adoption fees manageable, encouraging more families to adopt pets in need.
- **Communities Benefit:** Supporting shelters reduces the number of stray animals and helps ensure more pets find loving homes.

The fiscal impact is minimal – the Tax Commission estimates a potential revenue loss of under \$100,000, as most rescues were already not collecting taxes on adoption fees.

## Looking Ahead

This is a victory for Idaho's animal lovers and a win for common sense. By ensuring our laws align with the true nature of adoption services, we're supporting the compassionate work of shelters and rescues.

A huge thank you to Senator Codi Galloway and Representative Charlie Shepherd for their leadership on this issue. I was proud to support a bill that reflects Idaho's values

of community and care.

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## Why I Voted NO on House Bill 96aaS (as amended in the Senate)

[\(Click here for more bill information\)](#)

As your State Senator, I take every vote seriously. Recently, House Bill 96aaS (*as amended in the Senate*) came before the Senate. This bill would have restricted the types of flags that local governments and public schools can fly, allowing only official government, military, and certain educational flags.



At first glance, this might seem reasonable. Some flags can be controversial, and I understand the concerns. But as I considered the bill, one question kept coming to mind:

*Should the state government have the authority to dictate what cities, schools, and local communities can and can't do?*

After careful thought, my answer was clear: **No**.

## Defending Local Control

I voted against HB 96aaS because I strongly believe in the principle of local control. Local school boards, city councils, and parents know their communities best. They are in the right position to make decisions that reflect the values and preferences of the people they serve.

As a conservative, I firmly believe that the government is most effective when it is closest to the people. When we push more decisions to the state level, we undermine limited government and local self-governance.

## Respecting Community Voices

Choosing what flags to fly is just one example of the countless decisions local leaders face. While we may not always agree with every choice, respecting **local authority** is essential.

I trust local leaders to make responsible decisions. After all, they are directly accountable to their neighbors and constituents. Stripping away their ability to govern on issues like this sets a dangerous precedent — one where the state unnecessarily interferes with local matters.

## Understanding the Intent



I recognize the concerns that led to this bill. Some flags can carry divisive messages, and communities may struggle to navigate these challenges. But the solution isn't broad, top-down mandates from Boise. Instead, we should encourage thoughtful, local dialogue.

## My Commitment to You

I will always stand up for local control and the principles of limited government. Protecting the ability of our cities, schools, and communities to make decisions that reflect their values is a responsibility I take seriously.

Thank you for your trust and support. If you have any thoughts or questions, I'd love to hear from you — your voice matters.

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## Investing in Idaho's Future Doctors: A Major Step Forward

[\(Click here for more bill information\)](#)

The Idaho Senate recently took a significant step to strengthen medical education in our state. With a vote of 26 to 8, we passed House Bill 368aaS (*as amended in the Senate*). Now, the bill returns to the House of Representatives and, if approved, will head to the Governor's desk for his signature.

## Expanding Medical Opportunities for Idaho Students

HB 368aaS (*as amended in the Senate*) expands opportunities for Idaho students to become doctors through two pathways:

- **WWAMI Program:** A long-standing collaboration between Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho that allows Idaho students to complete their first two years of medical school at the University of Idaho before moving on to clinical training.
- **New University of Utah Partnership:** This addition will increase Idaho's medical school seats by 20, ensuring more students can train close to home.



## Addressing Past Challenges

In recent years, Idaho's request for 10 additional WWAMI seats was denied, and there were delays in confirming that Idaho taxpayer dollars wouldn't fund

there were delays in confirming that Idaho taxpayer dollars wouldn't fund abortion-related education. After direct communication and an apology from the University of Washington, we are confident in WWAMI's commitment to Idaho's values and students.

## A Balanced, Forward-Thinking Solution

Two weeks ago, I voiced concerns about House Bill 368aaS (*as amended in the Senate*), which originally proposed cutting Idaho's WWAMI medical seats from 40 to 30 without a secured replacement plan. Thanks to the leadership of Senator David Lent and Representative Lori Manwaring, we secured a win-win solution:

- Retain all 40 existing WWAMI seats
- Add 20 new seats through the University of Utah partnership
- Ensure more Idaho-trained doctors to serve rural and underserved communities

This isn't about choosing one university over another — it's about doing what's best for Idaho students and our healthcare system.

## Accountability and Commitment to Service

To ensure taxpayer dollars are used wisely, students receiving state-funded medical education must commit to practicing in Idaho for a set number of years. If they don't, they must reimburse the state for their educational costs. This ensures we invest in future doctors who will serve Idahoans.

## Looking Ahead

The passage of HB 368aaS (*as amended in the Senate*) demonstrates our dedication to growing a strong, sustainable healthcare workforce in Idaho. As the bill progresses through the final legislative steps, I remain hopeful and committed to supporting its implementation.

**This is a win for Idaho's future doctors, our communities, and our healthcare system. Let's continue investing in education, opportunity, and the well-being of Idahoans.**

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## Standing Strong: Protecting Idaho from Illegal Drug Advertising

[\(Click here for more bill information\)](#)

The Idaho Senate has taken a decisive step to protect our communities with the passage of House Bill 271. This prohibits



the advertisement of illegal drugs, including marijuana, within our state. This legislation upholds Idaho's values and ensures our families remain protected from the influence of illegal substances.



## Why This Bill Matters

Our neighboring states have adopted more lenient drug policies, and the results are concerning. Increased crime, homelessness, and mental health struggles have become prevalent. Businesses in these states are actively advertising marijuana to Idahoans, luring them across state lines. This practice is not only unethical, but it also burdens our communities with the resulting social consequences.

HB 271 makes this practice a misdemeanor, imposes a \$500 fine per violation, with each day of non-compliance counted as a separate offense. . Each day a violation exists is treated as a separate offense, ensuring strong accountability. The bill also applies Idaho's laws, as well as the laws of the state where the product is being sold. This ensures that businesses operating outside Idaho cannot legally target our residents with harmful advertising.

## Standing Firm on Idaho's Values

Our Constitution (Article 3, Section 24) calls on us to uphold virtue, sobriety, temperance, and morality – principles this legislation reinforces.

The Attorney General's office carefully reviewed HB 271 to ensure it is constitutionally sound, as commercial speech promoting illegal products is not protected under the First Amendment.

## A Unified Effort

Thanks to bipartisan collaboration, HB 271 was strengthened through thoughtful amendments. The Senate passed it with a strong 24-10 vote, demonstrating Idaho's shared commitment to keeping our communities safe.

## Looking Forward

Idahoans deserve to live in communities free from the damaging effects of illegal drugs. This law is an important step towards preserving our way of life and protecting our families.

As always, I welcome your thoughts and feedback. Together, we can continue to make Idaho a beacon of safety and opportunity.

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## Setting the Record Straight: Fulfilling Our

# Commitment to Idaho's Judicial System



[\(Click here for more bill information\)](#)

I'm proud to share Senate Bill 1185, passed in the Idaho Senate. This bill strengthens our judicial system, ensuring it operates efficiently and fairly – an essential pillar of our democracy.

## What Senate Bill 1185 Does:

Senate Bill 1185 provides necessary budget enhancements for Idaho's judicial branch. This budget does not expand the courts – it maintains and reinforces them to meet Idaho's growing needs. With our population increasing by 8.2% in five years, our courts face rising caseloads. SB 1185 provides the resources to ensure timely justice for all Idahoans.

### Key budget enhancements include:

1. **Judicial Compensation:** House Bill 322 authorized a \$17,000 salary increase for judges, ensuring Idaho retains top legal minds. This accounts for \$3.87 million of the judicial budget.
2. **Additional District Court Judges:** Senate Bills 1028 and 1029 approved two new District Court judges (Coeur d'Alene and Idaho Falls), along with court reporters, to reduce backlogs. The total cost for these additions is \$821,400.
3. **New Magistrate Judges:** Two new Magistrate Judges (Bonneville and Twin Falls Counties) will help manage a variety of cases, ensuring timely justice for Idahoans. The total budget increase for these positions is \$421,000.
4. **IT Infrastructure and Support:** Our judicial branch relies heavily on secure and efficient technology. An additional \$77,900 will be used to enhance IT support, ensuring reliable access to court systems and protecting against cybersecurity threats.

## Addressing Misinformation

A critic recently, mischaracterized this bill, suggesting it is misleading or wasteful. That is simply not the case.

To be clear, this budget directly reflects the policies passed by the legislature. Every dollar is accounted for and serves a critical purpose.

The fiscal note confirms that without the additional judicial positions and salary adjustments, the budget increase would have been less than 0.6%. However, these positions and adjustments were not optional – they were vital to ensuring the judicial system can function effectively and keep up with the demands of our growing state.

Claims that this budget is misleading overlooks both the legislative process and Idaho

law. This budget reflects exactly what was promised – funding for new judges and judicial operations as required by law.

## Why This Matters

Courts are not optional. They are a constitutional necessity. Without sufficient judges and resources, cases pile up, justice is delayed for victims, families, and businesses. By passing Senate Bill 1185, we are ensuring that every Idahoan receives timely, fair, and efficient legal proceedings.

## Looking Ahead

I am committed to transparency and responsible governance. Your trust is invaluable, and I will continue to ensure that every decision I make in the Senate reflects the best interests of our state.

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## Coming up next week...

[S1195](#) – State Tax Commission budget that supports H93-School Choice

[S1196](#) – Idaho Commission For Libraries budget.

[S1200](#) – Idaho State Historical Society budget.

[S1201](#) – Medicaid budget

[S1202](#) – Office of the State Public Defender – This one may be a tough one to pass.

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It's an honor to serve you, and I always welcome your thoughts and feedback. Please don't hesitate to reach out. Together, we can continue strengthening Idaho's future.

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## Sen Kevin Cook

### Contact and Connect:

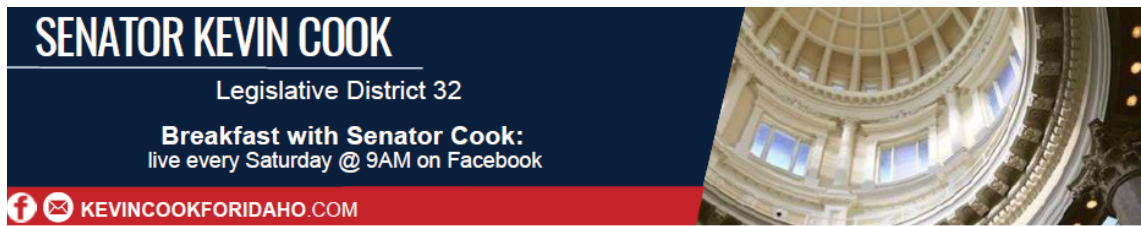
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### Committees:

- Education



- Finance
- Resources & Environment



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