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Senator Cook's Weekly Update 3/30 - 4/5 - Sine Die

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2025 LEGISLATIVE SESSION:

SENATOR COOK'S WEEKLY UPDATE



Weekly Newsletter

March 30, 2025

This past week...

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

SINE DIE – Wrapping Up the 2025 Idaho Legislative Session



After 89 days of legislation, discussion, and debate (not including weekends), the 2025 Idaho Legislative Session has officially come to a close. On Friday afternoon, both the House and Senate honored a long-standing tradition: committees were sent to the House and to the Governor's Office to formally announce that the Senate had concluded the business of the

people and was ready to adjourn *Sine Die*—a Latin term meaning “without a day,” signifying that our work for this session is complete and we will not reconvene until the next regular session. It's a respectful and symbolic gesture that marks the end of our duties for the year—and serves as a reminder of the seriousness and responsibility of public service.

I left the Capitol late Friday night and pulled into my driveway at 12:45 a.m. Saturday morning, grateful to be home and proud of what we accomplished this session.

This year's session was packed with meaningful legislation. Here are just a few highlights:

Tax Relief & Fiscal Responsibility

We delivered over **\$400 million in tax relief**, including cuts to income, property, and grocery taxes—putting more money back into the pockets of Idaho families and businesses. At the same time, we held to conservative budgeting principles by **shrinking the size of government** and protecting our rainy-day funds.

Education & Opportunity

We fully funded the **Idaho LAUNCH program**, which helps high school graduates pursue training for in-demand careers, creating more pathways to success across our state.

Safe Communities

We strengthened our support for **law enforcement and public safety**, with investments in training, equipment, and officer retention. We also passed legislation

aimed at addressing illegal immigration at the state level.

Rural Idaho & Infrastructure

We approved new investments in roads, bridges, and water infrastructure, with a focus on supporting rural communities. Rural schools also received additional help, including funds for aging buildings and early literacy programs.

Controversial Debates and Tough Choices

Every session brings tough choices and spirited debate. We worked through challenging issues, including the **Medical Freedom Act**, which saw multiple versions before a final compromise passed. We also tackled bills on **diversity in higher education**, **Medicaid reform**, and more.

While not everyone agrees on every bill, the process was open, respectful, and rooted in a shared commitment to Idaho's future. I'm grateful for my colleagues—on both sides of the aisle—who care deeply about our state and its people.

Closing Thoughts

Governor Little thanked the Legislature for helping deliver on his **"Keeping Promises"** agenda. As he put it:

"America wants what Idaho has—safe communities, bustling economic activity, increasing incomes, tax relief, fewer regulations, fiscal responsibility, and common sense values."

While I may not agree with every decision made this session, I believe we made meaningful progress—and I'm proud to have played a role.

Now that we're back home, I'm looking forward to **hearing directly from you**—at events, in schools, and across our communities. Your voice matters, and I'm here to represent it.

Thank you for the honor of serving as your senator. I remain committed to upholding Idaho's values, promoting freedom and responsibility, and ensuring your government stays accountable to the people it serves.

Why I Voted NO on Senate Bill 1198

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



Let me start by saying something I hope we all agree on: I believe in fairness, in recognizing progress, and in using common sense when we make laws. But I'm absolutely opposed to DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives.



absolutely opposed to DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) as we know it today.

When my kids were growing up, I always told them: if you see someone sitting alone at lunch or left out of a game, invite them to join. That's just being kind—and I bet many of you taught your kids the same thing. But that's not what DEI has turned into.

Today's version of DEI often prioritizes race, gender, or background over merit, effort, and ability. As a businessman, I believe I should be free to hire the most qualified candidate—period. No one, especially not the government, should tell me what boxes I need to check to make a “diverse” hire. And in higher education, admissions should be based on academic achievement—not identity politics.

Now, let's talk about **Senate Bill 1198**.

At first glance, it looks like a strong stance against DEI. But the truth is, **Idaho already has strong laws in place accomplish** what this bill claims to do. Over the past few years, we've taken clear, effective action:

- In 2021, we cut \$2.5 million from university budgets to eliminate DEI programs.
- In 2023, we banned state funding for DEI and social justice initiatives.
- In 2024, we outlawed mandatory DEI statements in hiring and admissions.
- And this year, with Senate Bill 1209, we cut another \$4 million—\$2 million each from Boise State and the University of Idaho—and ordered a full DEI audit..

That's a strong record. And it worked.

Boise State and the University of Idaho have responded. They've shut down DEI offices and complied with the laws we passed. Even lawmakers who have long criticized higher education have acknowledged that these institutions have changed course.

So the real question is: **why are we still punishing them?**

SB1198 is redundant. It bans what we've already banned and repeats rules we already enforce. It doesn't solve a new problem—it just sends the wrong message.

We can't keep saying, “*Change*,” then watch our universities change, and still say, “*Not good enough*.” That's not how accountability works. That's not how we build trust. As Senator Codi Galloway said:

“We cannot ask people to make change, watch them make change, and then continue to punish them. That is not how it works in the real business world.”

Instead of doubling down on punishment, let's stay focused on what matters:

education. Let's enforce the laws we already have and stop layering on new

education. Let's enforce the laws we already have and stop layering on new restrictions just to prove a point.

Idaho should be a place where academic freedom and equal opportunity thrive—not where fear and overregulation stifle honest learning and debate.

That's why I voted NO on SB1198. Was I wrong?

Advancing Literacy in Idaho: Senate Bill 1213 Passes the Senate

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

This week, I had the honor of presenting [Senate Bill 1213](#) before the full Idaho Senate. This bill provides the funding to implement Senate Bill 1069, which was signed into law on March 17, 2025. After a thoughtful and robust debate on the Senate floor, SB 1213 passed by a vote of 22 to 11. It moved to the Idaho House of Representatives for a full debate.



This bill represents our continued commitment to a top priority: ensuring **every child in Idaho learns to read by the end of third grade**. SB 1213 provides a **sustained investment**—not a one-time initiative—by allocating **\$5 million annually** for professional development and literacy training in a three-year cycle.

So, what exactly does Senate Bill 1213 do?

This bill strengthens K–3 literacy instruction by::

- **Funding statewide training** in the science of reading for all K–3 teachers and elementary administrators, with coaching focused on phonics, fluency, and comprehension.
- **Targeting support** to the districts and charter schools that score in the lowest 25% statewide on the Idaho Reading Indicator.
- **Expanding instructional time** by requiring schools to provide 60 additional hours for students scoring below basic and 30 hours for those at the basic level.
- **Improving adaptive learning tools** to meet diverse student needs.
- **Requiring annual evaluations** to ensure literacy efforts are effective and responsive.

Why do our teachers need this training?

It's a fair question. You might wonder, *"Aren't teachers already trained to teach reading?"*

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As a software engineer, I've had to continually update my skills to keep up with evolving technologies. I attend training to stay current and effective in my work. The same is true for our teachers.

While Idaho now requires colleges to train future educators in the science of reading, we have more than **20,000 K–3 teachers** currently in classrooms—many trained before this shift.

SB 1213 ensures these educators receive the same high-impact tools and support proven to boost literacy in today's classrooms.

And yes—it's working.

I recently received messages from educators in Idaho Falls School District 91, where this type of training is already in use.

- One principal shared that after implementing the SMART early literacy program, 92% of their 3rd-grade students tested proficient in reading this March.
- Another school saw a 37% improvement in reading scores from September to March.
- At one elementary school, where every K–3 teacher—including special education staff—received literacy training and coaching, **88% of students** are now reading at grade level.

These aren't projections—they're real outcomes from classrooms right here in Idaho.

Support That Teachers Are Asking For

SB 1213 funds **real-time coaching**, where experienced literacy coaches observe instruction, provide immediate feedback, and help teachers apply what they've learned—right in their classrooms. This hands-on support is the number one tool our teachers have requested from the Department of Education.

Why it matters

Reading by third grade is one of the strongest predictors of long-term academic success. It sets the foundation for learning in every subject.

As SB 1213 moves to the House, I look forward to continuing the conversation about how we build a stronger, smarter Idaho—starting with our youngest learners.

Standing Up for Idahoans: Senate Unanimously Passes HB 355 to Help Seniors and People with Disabilities Keep Their Homes

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



Idaho Senate unanimously passed House Bill 355, a commonsense and compassionate piece of legislation sponsored by Senator Bjerke. I strongly supported this bill because it provides critical relief to some of our most vulnerable citizens: low-income seniors, widows and widowers, veterans, and individuals with disabilities who are at

risk of losing their homes due to unpaid property taxes.

As many of you know, property taxes can become an overwhelming burden—especially for those living on fixed incomes. Some Idahoans have worked their entire lives, paid off their homes, and now find themselves in a heartbreaking position: struggling to pay rising property taxes and facing the real possibility of foreclosure.

House Bill 355 gives these homeowners a lifeline.

This bill expands Idaho's existing property tax deferral program, allowing eligible homeowners to defer not just their current taxes but also any past-due taxes, as well as interest, late charges, costs, and fees. In doing so, it helps prevent the loss of a person's home while preserving their dignity and stability.

Key Facts About HB 355:

- **No cost to counties or other taxpayers** – The program is funded by the state, not local governments or the general public.
- **Voluntary participation** – No one is required to use it, but it's available for those who need it.
- **Protects homeowners from predatory lenders** – This deferral option allows people to tap into their home's value without turning to risky second mortgages or reverse mortgages.
- **Supports people who've worked hard** – 99.9% of those who would use this program have paid off their homes and simply can't afford rising taxes anymore.
- **Addresses real risk** – In 2021, Kootenai County sold an occupied home at auction due to unpaid taxes. These rare but tragic cases can happen—and this bill helps prevent them.

Why Was This Bill Necessary?

While Idaho already has a property tax deferral program on the books, only 10 people across 44 counties are currently using it. Why so few? Because the current system is overly complex and its deadlines make it nearly impossible to access in time.

HB 355 fixes this by

HB 355 fixes this by:

- Clarifying that all outstanding taxes, not just current ones, are eligible for deferral
- Allowing applications to include prior years' delinquencies
- Giving the Idaho State Tax Commission authority to streamline the application process
- Creating a pathway for homeowners who are more than three years behind to redeem their home and avoid losing it to tax deed foreclosure

Some have claimed that this bill would “interfere” with the tax deed process. Let me be clear: It does not interfere—it resolves. By giving homeowners a tool to catch up on taxes using their own home equity, we help them stay in their homes and reduce the burden on county governments and courts.

Protecting Idaho's Values

HB 355 is about more than tax law—it's about upholding the Idaho values of hard work, property rights, and community care. It ensures that someone who has owned their home for decades isn't forced to sell it below market value or lose it entirely because they couldn't meet a deadline or afford a bill they didn't see coming.

This legislation is one of the most practical, cost-effective, and humane tools we have to address property tax hardship.

The bill now returns to the House for final approval. I will continue advocating for its passage until it is signed into law and becomes effective on July 1, 2025.

If you have any questions about HB 355 or how it may help you or someone you know, please don't hesitate to reach out to my office.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: Advancing Transparency in Idaho Politics

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

I'm proud to report that House Bill 398, a major update to Idaho's lobbying laws, passed the Senate this week with a strong bipartisan vote of 27-8. I voted yes because I believe Idahoans deserve to know who is trying to influence their government—and how.

Earlier this session, the House passed the same bill with a vote of 54-14. and now it heads to the Governor's desk for



signature.

Why This Bill Matters

Idaho's original lobbying laws—often called our “sunshine laws”—were created by the people in 1974 through a voter initiative. These laws were designed to bring transparency and accountability to campaign finance and lobbying efforts. But like many things from the 1970s, they haven't kept pace with the digital age.

What started as a well-meaning initiative became a tangled mix of campaign finance and lobbying rules, all buried in the same section of Idaho Code. Over the years, this has made it harder for citizens, candidates, and even lobbyists to clearly understand the laws governing political influence in our state.

HB 398 changes that.

Cleaning Up and Modernizing the Law

House Bill 398 does two important things:

1. **It reorganizes and moves Idaho's lobbying laws** from Title 67 (State Government and State Affairs) to Title 74 (Transparent and Ethical Government). This change is not just about structure—it's about making our laws easier to read, easier to find, and easier to enforce.
2. **It brings our laws into the 21st century.** Technology has changed the way lobbying works. Today, lobbyists aren't just meeting with lawmakers in person—they're running Facebook ads, sending targeted emails, recording podcasts, and using social media to shape public opinion. HB 398 updates our definitions to reflect this reality.

What's Changing—and What's Not

One concern raised during debate was whether this bill expands the definition of a “lobbyist.” The answer is **no**. The legal definition of a lobbyist—someone who is paid to influence legislation—has remained the same since 1974.

What has changed is what registered lobbyists must report. HB 398 improves public access to that information in several key ways:

- **Monthly Reporting:** All registered lobbyists must now file reports every month, year-round—not just during the legislative session. These reports will show who they're working for and what they're spending to influence legislation.
- **New Rules for Indirect Lobbying:** Lobbyists who spend more than \$100 on digital ads, email campaigns, social media posts, or other public-facing materials aimed at influencing legislation must file a special 48-hour report. These quick-turnaround reports ensure Idahoans can see who's spending money to sway public opinion—in *real time*.
- **Clearer Disclosure Requirements:** Any communication paid for by a lobbyist that tries to influence legislation or raise money must clearly state who

lobbyist that tries to influence legislation or raise money must clearly state who is behind it and whether it's a fundraising appeal. This includes mailers, online ads, and more.

- **Increased Accountability for State Entities:** For the first time, public agencies like universities will be required to report any money they spend lobbying the legislature—whether that money comes from public funds or private donations.

Sunshine Is a Good Thing

As Senate President Pro Tempore Kelly Anthon stated during debate:

“Sunshine is a good thing for money in politics.”

I couldn't agree more.

This legislation doesn't limit free speech. It doesn't stop anyone from making their voice heard. What it *does* is help Idahoans see who is behind the message, especially when money is involved. And that's a value our state has always stood for—clear, open, and honest government.

What's Next

With the Senate and House having passed HB 398, it now awaits action by the Governor. I'm hopeful it will be signed into law and take effect on July 1, 2025.

Idaho's government should work for the people—and that starts with transparency.

Thank you for staying informed, for asking good questions, and for holding all of us accountable. That's how we build trust. That's how we move Idaho forward.

The Truth About Idaho's Budget: Steady, Not Spiraling



There are some who say Idaho's budget is out of control. They make it sound like we're on a runaway train heading for disaster. But as your state senator, I believe it's important to deal in facts—not fear. It's why I ask our legislative budget staff many, many, many questions about our state's budget in my work on the Joint Finance-Appropriation Committee.

So, is Idaho's budget out of control?

The answer is no. Not even close.

In fact, when you dig into the numbers and adjust for inflation and population growth, you'll find something pretty amazing: Idaho's budget is steady, responsible, and well-managed.

Let's break it down in simple terms.

From 2005 to 2025:

- Our General Fund (state tax dollars) base budget per person grew from \$1,420 to \$2,539. That's about a 3.9% average annual increase.
- But when we adjust for inflation, the real growth is only about 0.9% per year. That's a modest, steady climb—not a rocket launch.
- If we include all state funds (the General Fund plus dedicated funds like transportation and higher education), the per-person spending grew from \$1,896 to \$3,661, or about 4.6% annually.
- Adjusted for inflation, that growth is only 1.33% per year.

These numbers tell a clear story. Our budget matches the reality of our state. It's grown responsibly to meet the needs of our growing state, without skyrocketing beyond control.

Now, let's zoom in to 2018, the year Idaho expanded Medicaid. Some critics warned that it would wreck our budget. So, what really happened?

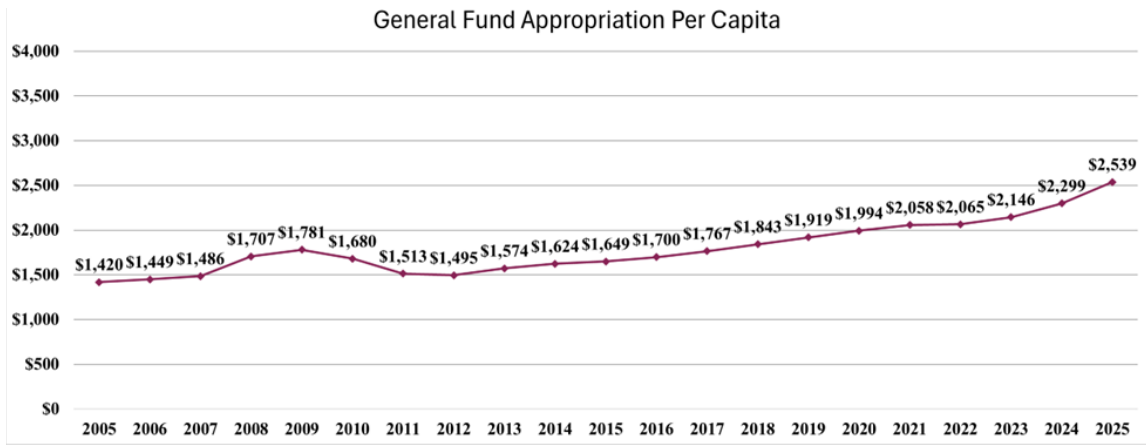
Looking at the data, we don't see a bump or shift in our ability to meet other responsibilities. Medicaid Expansion, a policy adopted by Idahoans through the initiative process, brought in more funding from the federal government to cover health care for low-income Idahoans. It helped hardworking people with limited or no access to health care, and we planned for it.

That's called smart budgeting. It also represented a logical path to help balance the challenges of keeping our rural hospitals open and solvent in communities with limited health care resources.

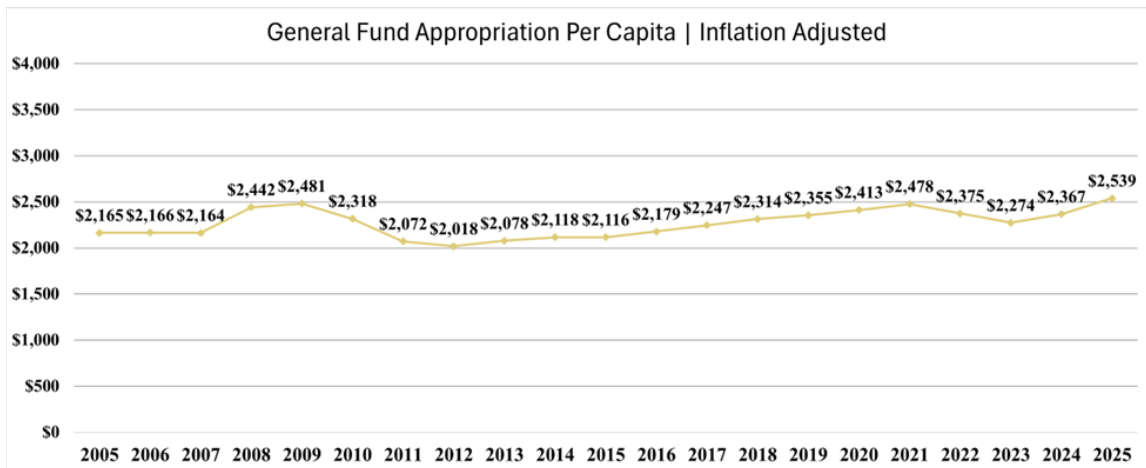
As Idaho continues to grow, our budget will need to respond to those changes. We'll need to support schools, roads, public safety, and health care. But growth doesn't mean waste. It means responsibility. It means making sure every dollar works for you.

Along the way, we've passed extensive tax cuts, returning money to taxpayers. From income tax to property tax, we've met our constitutional obligation to balance the budget alongside the state's growth and keep our tax structure competitive.

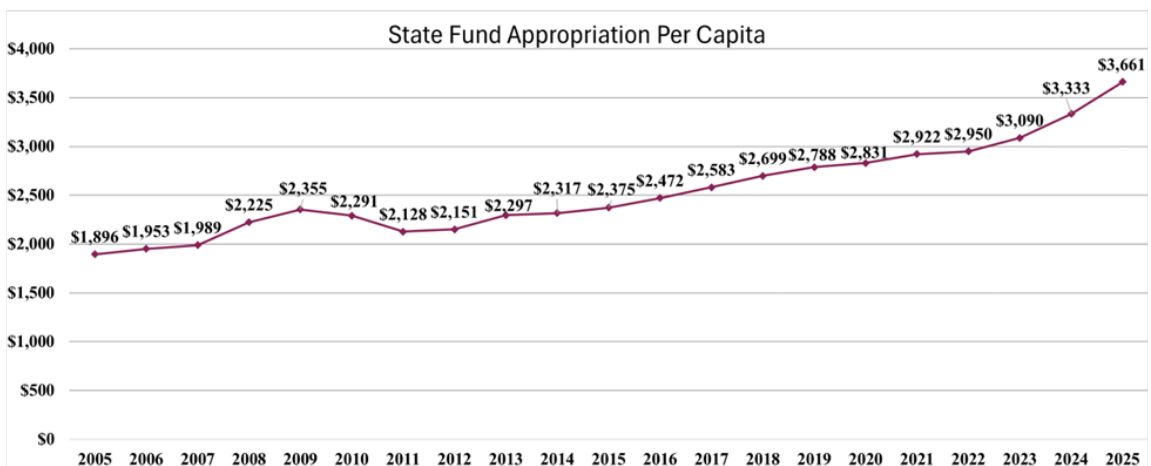
The graphs below show appropriation data for FY 2005 – FY 2025. The number shown on the table is the base budget divided by Idaho's total population each year. Included charts are General Fund appropriation per capita, state fund appropriation per capita (General Fund + Dedicated Funds), and both of those adjusted for inflation using the consumer price index (CPI).



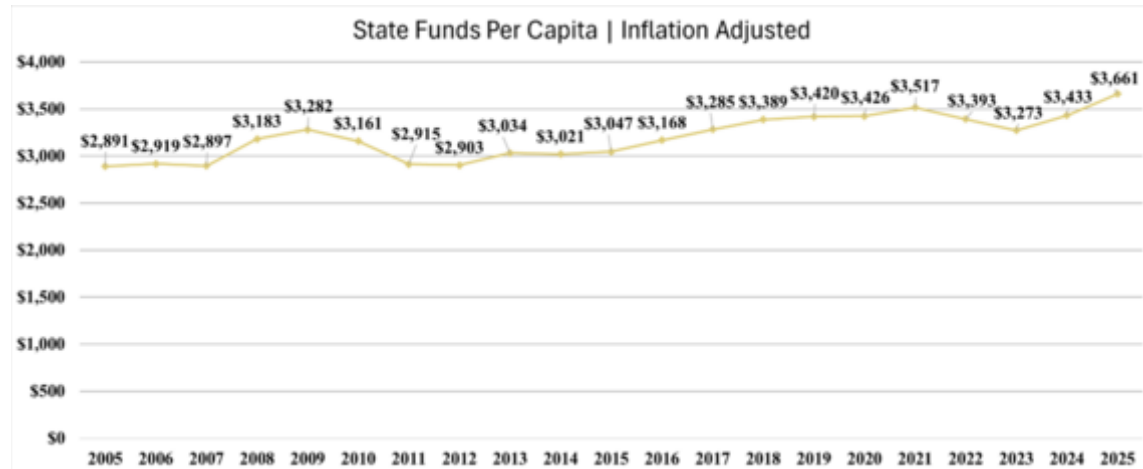
The chart above shows the base appropriation per capita on the General Fund dating back to 2005. Over this time, the base General Fund appropriation grew from \$1,420 per capita to \$2,539 per capita, for a year over year growth of 3.9%.



The chart above shows the base appropriation per capita on the General Fund adjusted for inflation dating back to 2005. Adjusted for inflation, General Fund appropriation per capita rose from \$2,165 per capita to \$2,539 per capita, for a year over year growth of 0.9%.



The chart above shows the base appropriation per capita on state funds (General and dedicated funds) dating back to 2005. Over this time, base state fund appropriation grew from \$1,896 per capita to \$3,661 per capita, for a year over year growth of 4.6%.



The chart above shows the base appropriation per capita on state funds (General and dedicated funds), adjusted for inflation, dating back to 2005. Over this time, adjusted for inflation, the base budget grew from \$2,891 per capita to \$3,661 per capita, for a year over year growth of 1.33%.

I'll keep watching our budget closely and asking the tough questions, so you can trust that your hard-earned money is being used wisely.

Investing in Idaho's Future: \$30 Million for Water Management

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

Here is some important news from the Statehouse that directly affects Southeast Idaho—and our shared future.

The Idaho Senate recently passed House Bill 445, the budget for the Department of Water Resources, with a vote of 23 in favor and 12 opposed. The House passed it earlier this month with a 56 to 13 vote. I proudly supported this legislation because it makes a strong investment in one of our most valuable and limited resources: water.



This budget includes over \$31 million in new funding for Fiscal Year 2026. The largest and most impactful part of that is a \$30 million allocation specifically for water infrastructure projects. This funding is essential for sustaining agriculture, supporting communities, and preserving the aquifers that serve as lifelines across our region.

Why This Matters for Southeast Idaho

Half of this \$30 million is designated for Board District 4, which includes much of Southeast Idaho. These funds will support the 2024 Stipulated Mitigation Plan—an agreement between surface and groundwater users on the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA). This plan helps ensure that our water is shared fairly and sustainably, especially during dry years.

With these funds, we'll see projects that include:

- **Aquifer recharge** to replenish underground water supplies
- **Rehabilitation of water storage systems**, such as reservoirs and canals
- **Emergency repairs** to critical infrastructure
- **Efficiency improvements** for water delivery and conservation

What Else Is in the Budget

Besides the \$30 million for projects, the bill supports several other key initiatives that strengthen how we manage water across the state:

- **\$716,000 for aquifer monitoring and modeling**, including upgrades to the ESPA groundwater model
- **Four new full-time staff** in the Water Administration Bureau to help manage water rights, especially in the new water districts created by 2024 legislation
- **Continued upgrades to GIS mapping and digital records systems**, improving transparency and access to water data
- **Equipment replacements** like water meters and vehicles for fieldwork
- **Support for digitizing water use records**, making it easier for water users to submit and manage documents online

All of these enhancements help Idaho prepare for the future with smarter tools, stronger data, and more local expertise.

Strong Leadership Behind the Bill

I want to thank Senator Van Burtenshaw of Mud Lake for his strong advocacy on behalf of Idaho's water users. His leadership has been instrumental in bringing attention to the needs of Eastern Idaho. I also appreciate Senator Jim Woodward for presenting this bill in the Senate and helping guide it to passage.

During debate on the Senate floor, Senator Woodward emphasized the broad statewide benefits of this bill—from North Idaho to the Wood River Valley to the Eastern Snake Plain. His message was clear: this isn't just about one area, it's about ensuring all of Idaho has access to clean, reliable water now and in the future.

ensuring all of Idaho has access to clean, reliable water now and in the future.

Moving Forward

Water is not just an agricultural issue—it's a community issue. It affects everything from farming to family life, from economic development to environmental protection. As your State Senator, I will continue to support policies that promote sustainable water use, fairness among water users, and strong local control over our water resources.

We have a responsibility to make wise choices today that protect our way of life for tomorrow. House Bill 445 is a strong step in that direction.

Idaho Students Shine in National Education Report

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



I have some great news to share about the hard work and progress happening in our Idaho schools.

The latest results from the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP)—often called the Nation's Report Card—show that Idaho students

are holding strong in reading and math. These tests measure how well fourth and eighth graders across the country are doing in core subjects like math and reading.

Let's start with our fourth graders. In reading, Idaho ranked near the top! Only four states scored higher than we did. That's an amazing accomplishment and something we should all be proud of. Even more inspiring is the progress made by our students with disabilities—their average reading scores increased by 13 points since 2022. That's a big jump and a sign that more of our students are getting the support they need to succeed.

In eighth grade reading, Idaho also outperformed the national public school average, with only two states scoring higher. These results are consistent with what we saw in 2022, which means Idaho students continue to meet high standards, even as education across the country is facing major challenges.

These scores are more than just numbers. They represent the dedication of our students, teachers, and families. They show that Idaho's focus on strong local schools, high expectations, and support for every learner is paying off.

But we can't stop here. Let's keep working to give every child in Idaho the tools they need to thrive—whether they're in a classroom in Pocatello, a small town in the Magic

Valley, or anywhere in between.

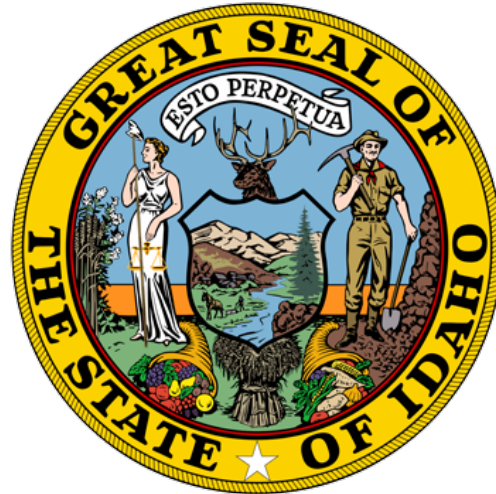
Thank you for your continued support of our schools and our future.

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.

Sen Kevin Cook

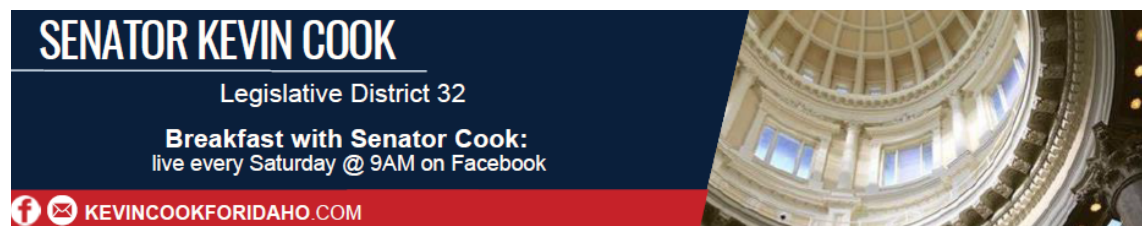
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- Breakfast with Senator Cook: Live on Facebook: 9 AM Saturday



Committees:

- Education
- Finance
- Resources & Environment



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