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WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

March 19th, 2025

This past week...

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

House Bill 243: Ensuring Safe, Accessible, and Locally Controlled Childcare in Idaho

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

Ensuring Idaho's children have access to safe, reliable, and affordable childcare is one of the most pressing challenges facing our state. Parents across Idaho are struggling to find available childcare spots, while providers face increasing difficulties staying in business. To address this crisis, the Idaho Senate recently debated and passed House Bill 243 (HB 243) – a measure designed to strike a balance between safety, accessibility, and local control in our childcare system.

Understanding the Challenge

Despite investing \$574 million in federal and state childcare funds, Idaho's number of licensed childcare facilities has declined, and available childcare seats have become even more scarce. One key factor contributing to this crisis is an inconsistent and often burdensome regulatory system, which discourages providers from entering or remaining in the industry.



Currently, only nine cities in Idaho have local childcare regulations, with some rules stretching across hundreds of pages. While regulations are essential for child safety, excessive red tape makes it difficult for providers to operate and expand.

What HB 243 Does

This bill creates a streamlined approach to childcare regulation by:

- Establishing clear, consistent statewide safety standards to ensure children are cared for in a secure environment.
- Simplifying and clarifying licensing processes, making it easier for new providers to start their businesses.
- Setting a baseline child-to-caregiver ratio statewide, while still allowing local governments adjustments.
- Eliminating the two-tier regulatory system, placing all licensing authority at the state level for greater consistency.

Finding the Right Balance

Finding the Right Balance

During the Senate debate, Senator Guthrie made a compelling comparison between the childcare crisis and Idaho's housing shortage:

"We all know we need more childcare, just like we need more affordable housing. But if we deregulated everything – removing safety inspections and requirements – would that really solve the problem? Or would it create new dangers? If we want more childcare, is removing regulations the right path forward?"

This bill carefully removes unnecessary barriers while ensuring children remain in safe, high-quality environments. It strikes a middle ground between deregulation and overregulation—allowing for a flexible, community-centered approach while maintaining essential safety measures.

What's Next?

The Senate passed HB 243 by a 25-10 vote, moving Idaho closer to a more accessible, sustainable childcare system.

Your Voice Matters

I want to hear from you! How can we improve childcare access while keeping children safe?

Let's work together to build a stronger Idaho for our families

Senate Joint Memorial 101 – Securing Idaho's Water Future

[\(Click here to read full bill\)](#)

Water is the lifeblood of Idaho—it sustains our farms, fuels our industries, and provides for our communities. Yet, as we face ongoing drought concerns, population growth, and rising water demands, it is critical that we take proactive steps to secure a sustainable water future.

This week, I'm excited to share a major step forward: the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee (JFAC) approved additional \$30 million in ongoing funding for the Idaho Department of Water Resources. While this is just the beginning, it lays a strong foundation for long-term water security.

A Collaborative Effort

This funding would not have been possible without the dedicated leadership of Senator Van Burtenshaw and Lt. Governor Scott Bedke. Their tireless



efforts played a crucial role in securing these funds, and I want to extend my deepest appreciation for their commitment to Idaho's water resources.



Senator Van Burtenshaw (left) & Lt.

Where Will the Money Go?

The Water Resource Board will allocate these funds to critical projects that enhance Idaho's water storage, delivery, and sustainability, including:

- **Aquifer Recharge & Groundwater Management** – Strengthening our aquifers to ensure long-term water availability.
- **Storage & Conveyance System Development & Rehabilitation** – Upgrading reservoirs, canals, pipelines, and diversion structures to improve efficiency and resilience.
- **Water Supply & Delivery Improvements** – Implementing strategies to reduce waste, enhance efficiency, and ensure reliable access to water.
- **Emergency Repairs & Infrastructure Upgrades** – Providing funding for urgent repairs and enhancements to safeguard communities in times of crisis.

Ensuring Fair Distribution of Funds

To guarantee that these funds are distributed equitably across the state, no more than 50% of the total allocation in a given year can be used within a single board district—unless there are no competing applications from other districts.

For Fiscal Year 2026, the funding will be allocated as follows:

- **50% to Board District 3**
- **50% to Board District 4**, with a focus on supporting the 2024 Stipulated Mitigation Plan, which is essential for managing water resources in the Eastern Snake Plain.

Why This Matters for Idaho

Investing in water sustainability is an investment in Idaho's future—in agriculture, the economy, and our communities. This funding is a critical step toward ensuring that our water infrastructure remains strong, efficient, and resilient.

While this is a huge win, our work is far from over. We must continue pushing for long-term solutions, innovative conservation strategies, and responsible water management policies to protect Idaho's water supply for future generations.

Keeping Idaho's Skies Safe and Beautiful: Why I Supported HB 146

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

Idaho's night skies are part of what makes our state so special. But for many, the blinking red lights atop wind turbines have disrupted that natural beauty. While these lights are crucial for aviation safety, they also contribute to light pollution, especially in rural areas.



That's why I proudly voted **YES** on House Bill 146 (HB 146) – a commonsense solution that balances safety with preserving our night skies.

What Does HB 146 Do?

HB 146 requires commercial wind energy systems to install Aircraft Detection Lighting Systems (ADLS) – but only if approved by the FAA. This technology keeps turbine lights off unless an aircraft is nearby.

Key benefits of HB 146:

- **Darker night skies** – No more constant flashing red lights.
- **Continued air safety** – Lights turn on only when needed.
- **No new costs for taxpayers** – Wind developers, not taxpayers, cover the cost.

How Does ADLS Work?

- Uses radar to monitor airspace around wind farms.
- Lights activate only when an aircraft is detected.
- Once the aircraft leaves, the lights turn off.

This **FAA-approved system** has already reduced nighttime light pollution by up to **95% in other states**.

Addressing Concerns

- **Myth:** ADLS only detects aircraft with transponders.
- **Reality:** ADLS uses radar, detecting all aircraft, transponder or not.
- **Myth:** ADLS is unproven technology.
- **Reality:** ADLS is FAA-approved and must meet strict aviation safety requirements.
- **Myth:** ADLS will increase costs for Idahoans.
- **Reality:** Wind farm owners bear the cost, not taxpayers.

What's Next?

With the Senate's narrow 18-15 passage of HB 146, we're one step closer to reducing unnecessary light pollution while maintaining aviation safety.

Do you support light-mitigating technology for wind turbines? Let me know in the comments or reach out to my office — I'd love to hear your thoughts!

Together, we can keep Idaho's skies safe, clear, and beautiful.

Celebrating Idaho's Potatoes with New Specialty License Plates



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

Idaho is famous for its potatoes, and now you can showcase that pride right on your vehicle! House Bill 204, presented by Senator Van Burtenshaw, has passed the Senate with overwhelming support (30-1, with 4 absent), introducing two new specialty potato license plates.

A Tribute to Idaho's Potato Legacy

For decades, Idaho's potatoes have been recognized as the best in the world. While our standard plates already feature "Famous Potatoes," these new designs offer a fresh way to celebrate our agricultural heritage, inspired by classic 1950s styles.

The two new plate options:

- **Black and White Plate** – Featuring white lettering on a sleek black background, this vintage-style plate costs \$70 initially with a \$50 for renewal fee. A portion of proceeds supports the Idaho Potato Commission and the state highway account.
- **White and Teal Plate** – With teal lettering on a white background, this is the most affordable specialty plate option with a \$2.75 fee.

Both plates proudly display "**Idaho World Famous Potatoes**," reinforcing our state's reputation as the potato capital of the world.

Why This Matters

These plates do more than add flair — they help fund essential state projects.

- The black plate contributes to the Idaho Potato Commission, which promotes and supports Idaho's potato industry.
- Both plates help maintain Idaho's roads and infrastructure.

This bill reflects Idahoans' enthusiasm for celebrating our agricultural roots while ensuring continued support for the industries that keep our state strong.

Moving Forward

While some have raised concerns about potential impacts on other state programs, such as the Idaho Heritage Trust, this bill strikes a balance — offering new options without taking away from existing traditions.

Get Your Plate and Show Your Support!

With the bill's passage, Idaho drivers will soon be able to order these plates through the Idaho Transportation Department. Whether you're a farmer, a proud Idahoan, or simply a fan of our world-famous potatoes, this is a great way to show your state pride while supporting Idaho's economy.

Consider making the switch when these plates become available — it's a small way to celebrate what makes Idaho unique

A Step Forward for Idaho's Schools: Outcomes-Based Funding

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

I'm excited to share that Senate Bill 1147, championed by Senator Dave Lent, has passed the Senate with a 22-13 vote. This bill introduces an Outcomes-Based Funding model, to ensure that our public schools receive funding based on student achievement and growth.



What is Outcomes-Based Funding?

Traditionally, our schools have been funded based on enrollment numbers and other fixed costs. This system provides stability, but doesn't reward improvement in student learning. Senate Bill 1147 modernizes our K-12 school funding formula by including an Outcomes-Based Funding component. This means that schools and public charter institutions will receive financial support based on students meeting two key outcomes:

- **Math Proficiency and Growth (Grades 5-8)** – Schools will receive funding when students show measurable progress and proficiency in mathematics.
- **College & Career Readiness (High School Students)** – Schools will be rewarded when students earn industry-recognized certifications, complete dual-credit courses, or graduate prepared for college or the workforce.

Why This Matters

By aligning school funding with student success, we aim to incentivize schools to: Help students achieve their potential and prepare students for better prepared for real-world jobs and higher education opportunities. This is another way to ensure taxpayer dollars are used effectively, as funding will be tied to outcomes rather than just attendance.

The governor has accounted for \$35 million in the FY 2026 budget to implement this initiative. These funds will empower schools to implement evidence-based teaching strategies and support student achievement.

Moving Forward

While this bill marks a significant step, there is still more to do. We must ensure that our schools have the resources and guidance they need to succeed under this new model. I encourage all parents, teachers, and community members to stay engaged as we continue refining and improving our education system.

Senate Bill 1158: Protecting Our Children in the Digital Age

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

This past week, I presented Senate Bill 1158, the Children's Device Protection Act, to the Senate State Affairs Committee. The bill proposed a simple but crucial safeguard: requiring parental filtering software to be automatically enabled on mobile devices for minors, with parents having the option to turn it off.

Despite strong support from parents, legal experts, psychologists, and young men from BYU-Idaho, the bill failed in committee by a narrow 4-5 vote. Though disappointed, I remain committed to this fight. Our children's safety is too important to ignore.

A Heartbreaking Reality

During testimony, one mother shared a devastating story that I will paraphrase: *(Full testimonial at bottom of newsletter)*

"When my son was eight, he unknowingly exposed himself and several classmates to inappropriate behaviors. The cause? Exposure to pornography at a sleepover. The host mother had assured all parents that her devices were protected, but another child had brought a device. My son saw things no child should. This led to actions he didn't understand, forever altering his childhood. The trauma they experienced could have been prevented with just one simple safeguard. If this bill had been law, my son – and so many others – could have been protected."

This is not an isolated case. Children across the country are exposed to harmful content daily. This bill would have provided a basic safeguard to prevent such exposure.

Why This Bill Matters

Early exposure to pornography has been linked to addiction, distorted views of relationships, and even grooming by predators. Law enforcement confirms many children first encounter explicit content through search engines — *not because they seek it, but because it finds them*. This bill would have helped close that gateway, protecting them from harmful online traps, including predatory chat rooms and trafficking sites.



Importantly, this bill did not infringe on parental rights — filters could be turned off if desired. It also placed no burden on businesses or adult users. The only impact would have been on tech manufacturers, requiring a simple software adjustment, well within their capability.

The Opposition & Out-of-State Influence

Despite overwhelming support from Idaho parents and child safety advocates, nearly all opposition came from out-of-state lobbying groups. After the hearing, a representative from the Idaho Freedom Foundation — a group that consistently opposes common-sense protections — confronted me in the hallway.

This individual is not even a full-time Idaho resident. He lives in Utah and spends only three months a year lobbying in Boise. Why are out-of-state interests fighting so hard against protecting Idaho's children? This should concern every Idahoan.

A Step in the Right Direction

Some ask, *"Would this bill have made a difference?"* The answer is an undeniable **YES**.

This bill wasn't a silver bullet, but it was a critical step forward. Other states — Utah, Texas, Montana, and Louisiana — are recognizing Big Tech's failure to protect children and are taking action.

We attempted to work with tech companies. Apple dismissed us outright: "You won't win." Google initially showed interest, then withdrew without offering solutions.

If they won't act, we must.

The Fight Continues

Though this bill did not pass, I refuse to give up. This is not about politics — it's about protecting childhood innocence.

To parents: You are the first and most important line of defense. Talk to your children. Set boundaries. Stay involved in their digital lives. We will keep fighting for legislative solutions, but in the meantime, let's do everything we can to protect our kids today.

I want to personally thank everyone who supported this bill – those who testified, those who reached out, and those who continue to stand up for Idaho's children. This fight is far from over.

Together, we will make Idaho a safer place for the next generation.

Coming up next week...

[H 138](#) - Big discussions on Medicaid Expansion and Managed Care Organizations (MCOs).

[H 368](#) - Expanding opportunities for Idaho to add medical education seats other than WWAMI. Let's do it but not lose any seats at University of Washington, one of the best medical schools in the country.

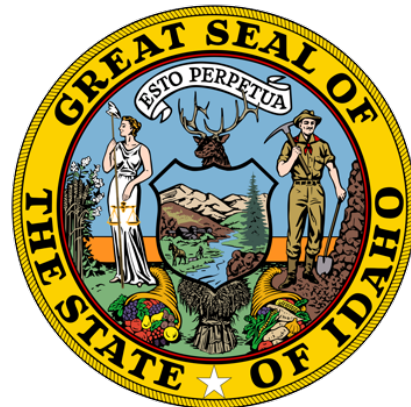
JFAC sets the Medicaid budget.

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

Contact and Connect:

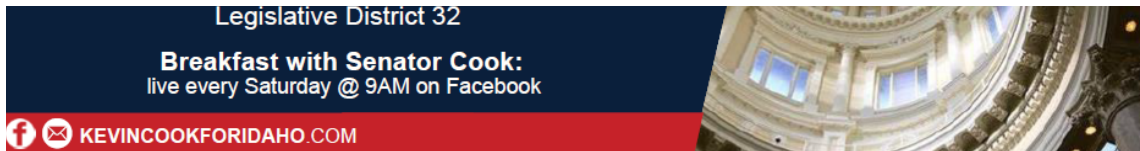
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- Breakfast with Senator Cook: Live on Facebook: 9 AM Saturday



Committees:

- Education
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