

Growing the ground beneath our feet: The Upper Valley Soil Health Forum

AT A GLANCE

From an initial 65 participants to 84 this year; farmers, ranchers and producers from across Idaho and neighboring states left the forum ready to change how they farm.

The Situation

Healthy soil is the foundation of every farm, every garden and ultimately every meal. Yet for decades, the pressures of modern production agriculture have focused on chemical inputs, monoculture and tillage while neglecting that foundation. Across the American West, inherently fragile soils lack even a baseline study to make judgements on soil health trends.

Eastern Idaho's producers face these pressures alongside the unique challenges of our region: alkaline soils, limited water and a short growing season that leaves little margin for error. Meanwhile, the conversation about regenerative agriculture — an approach that enlists microbiological allies rather than excluding pests at all costs, including these potential allies — was happening loudly at the national level but largely without a local voice or a local venue.

In December 2025, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) formalized what many farmers already sensed was coming, launching a \$700 million Regenerative Pilot Program through Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to help producers adopt practices that improve soil health, water quality and long-term productivity. Farmers who want to participate need knowledge on soil health to act on



UVSHF at the Legacy Flight Museum, the only community venue big enough to host the growing event. Photo by Daniel Wilcox.

that opportunity. That knowledge must come from somewhere.

University of Idaho Extension identified this gap as early as 2023. Regenerative agriculture and soil health were already reshaping national conversations, yet producers in the Upper Valley had no local forum to access high-quality, research-based information on these topics — no place to sit across from national experts, hear from fellow farmers, and leave with something they could implement the following morning.

Our Response

In 2025, University of Idaho Extension in Madison County partnered with the Henry's Fork Foundation and Living Soil Management to create the Upper

Valley Soil Health Forum — a full-day event designed to bring national expertise in regenerative agriculture directly to eastern Idaho producers at an accessible cost.

The organizing philosophy was to pair credentialed researchers with pioneering farmers and ranchers who have done the hard work of transitioning their operations so that producers could see where theory meets practice — where science meets dirt.

In 2025, the forum opened with Don M. Huber, professor emeritus of plant pathology at Purdue University and University of Idaho alumnus, whose 60 years of research on soil biology, microbial ecology and pesticide-disease interactions have made him an internationally sought-after expert. Local practitioners Tyrel and Lindsey Bingham brought the human health and on-farm management dimensions into focus.

In 2026, the program deepened and expanded. Nutritionist Sara Keough connected the dots between soil microbiomes and human health. Thomas Dykstra brought cutting-edge research on insect behavior, plant health and soil electrical conductivity. Nathan Gelles shared practical micro-farm production experience. And rancher Jared Sorensen of AgSteward spoke directly to the economics of regenerative transition — how to steward the land and still make a living.

Both years, the NRCS presented on current conservation programs available to producers — turning the forum into not just an educational event but a practical on-ramp for farmers ready to act.

Program Outcomes

The Upper Valley Soil Health Forum has grown in reach and impact. Participants leave with increased knowledge and strong intent to change how they farm.

Reach and attendance

- 29% increase in participation from 2025 to 2026.
- Representing 17 Idaho counties plus Wyoming, Utah and Oregon.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Knowledge gain

- Every presentation in both years produced measurable self-reported knowledge gains.
- In 2026 the strongest gains were in Soil Microbiomes and Human Health (+1.35), Electrical Conductivity of Soils (+1.39), and Meat is Medicine (+1.28)—on a five-point scale

Behavior change intent

- 88% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed they intend to implement a tool, strategy, or practice from the forum.
- 88% agreed or strongly agreed they will change their management based on what they learned.

Production impact

- 2025: 70% said the forum improved their operational efficiency; 60% said it improved profitability; 80% said it improved sustainability — with no responses in the negative for any category
- 2026: Results were equally strong, with sustainability showing the highest affirmative response at 81%

Economic value

- Of 2026 responses estimating operational value, the majority estimated the forum was worth \$1,000 or more to their operation — with several estimating \$5,000 or more

One participant wrote: “I have gone to many workshops and conferences like this in the past 10 years and think this is absolutely one of the best I’ve been to.”

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

This program is the product of genuine partnership. Henry’s Fork Foundation (Daniel Wilcox) and Soil & Soul Ag Consulting (Shilo Bingham) have been essential collaborators. Their networks and shared commitment to the producers of eastern Idaho make this event possible. Thank you also to the many Soil and Water Conservation districts.