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Basic farm economics for natural resources conservation service staff

AT A GLANCE

Knowledge of economics concepts is important for USDA NRCS staff to better understand and contextualize the business management decisions that Idaho farmers and ranchers make.

The Situation

Idaho farmers and ranchers commonly consider enrolling in a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) program such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for reasons such as improving soil health or reducing erosion. USDA NRCS provides cost-share assistance and payments for implementing certain farm and ranch activities. The benefits and costs of such activities and program assistance is best understood in the context of an overall farm business management plan.

USDA NRCS staff are required to take a training on economics to achieve planner certification. USDA NRCS used to have a staff economist who would deliver the economics training. However, that economist is no longer with USDA NRCS. Thus, members of the Idaho USDA NRCS Management and Strategy Team reached out to the University of Idaho Extension's agricultural economics faculty (Patrick Hatzenbuehler, Brett Wilder and Colby Field) to fill the role and implement the training.



Basic farm economics training conducted at the University of Idaho Caldwell Research and Extension Center in June 2026.

Our Response

Our team of UI Extension agricultural economists engaged with staff in the Idaho USDA NRCS Management and Strategy Team to better understand their need and obtain information on the design and content covered in prior USDA NRCS economics trainings. After internal discussion, the UI Extension agricultural economics team decided to design and implement a hybrid training (with both online and in-person components) called "Basic Farm Economics for NRCS Staff."

For the online portion, the UI Extension team developed and recorded 11 presentations pertaining to farm business management (three presentations), produc-

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tion economics (four presentations) and producer planning tools (four presentations). These presentations and associated materials (e.g., course summaries, case studies) were uploaded as a course on the online "Keep Learning" platform. The UI Extension team estimated that the online portion would take about four hours to complete. It was expected that the training participants would complete the online training before the in-person training. Three in-person trainings were implemented in Moscow, Pocatello and Caldwell in late May and early June 2026, and there was a total of 26 staff members who completed the training. The in-person trainings included an overview of the online materials and two group projects, which included group presentations at their conclusion.

The group project on the first day focused on developing partial budgets and that on the second day focused on creating enterprise budgets in the context of agricultural risk (e.g., production, market). These group activities were based on region-specific case farms and included a main task pertaining to addressing issues related to improving soil health. Groups were encouraged and expected to encompass aspects related to USDA NRCS programs into their projects.

Program Outcomes

There were 13 different farm economics concepts and/or topic areas (e.g., income statement, enterprise budget) for which knowledge change from before and after participation in the training were evaluated. The knowledge levels were measured on a Likert scale that ranged from zero (no understanding) to four (strong understanding).

The average knowledge level for a given topic before the training ranged from one (for enterprise budgets and fundamental analysis) to 1.5 (for balance sheet and income statement). The average knowledge level for a given topic after the training ranged from 1.9 (for marginal analysis) to 2.8 (for risk in agriculture).

The range of changes in average knowledge for a given topic from before to after the training (i.e., average for after the course minus average before the course) ranged from 0.8 to 1.6. Out of the 13 different Farm Economics concepts and/or topic areas covered, the change in average knowledge from before to after the training was greater than one for 10 (77%) of them.

In response to the question, "Did you learn something you will actually use or did this course just satisfy a requirement?" out of 14 responses, 12 (86%) indicated they will either likely (nine responses) or definitely (three responses) use the training material in their position.

The Future

Our team of University of Idaho Extension agricultural economists intends to implement future trainings such as this for USDA NRCS staff in the years ahead on an as needed basis. Much of the content in online portion of the training that was developed in the University of Idaho Keep Learning platform will also be utilized in other Extension programs such as a prospective self-guided Farm Financial Analysis course.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

- University of Idaho Extension
- University of Idaho Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology
- U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA NRCS)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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