

Opinion

GUEST VIEWS

Government shutdown puts U.S. farms at risk

Farmers and ranchers don't quit when times get tough. When a tractor breaks down, we get out our tools and get to work. When a storm is coming, everyone pitches in to get the crops harvested. And when we disagree on how to handle a problem, we sit down at the kitchen table or gather around the tailgate, and we work it out.

That's what Congress needs to do now to end the shutdown. It's time for both sides of the aisle to come together, find a solution, and reopen the federal government. Farmers, rural communities, and families across the country are counting on our lawmakers to do their job.

Rural communities hurt

Shutting down the federal government has ripple effects across our nation's economy and communities. It's not just bringing things to a halt in Washington, D.C.; it also cuts off important programs and services that rural Americans rely on. USDA offices in counties across the country are severely diminished in their staff and capacity. The men and women who work at these offices, serving local farms and ranches, are our neighbors. These federal employees at the local level often live paycheck to



GUEST VIEW

Zippy Duval

paycheck and cannot wait indefinitely as Congress holds up federal funding.

Small- and medium-sized farms have been left without critical reports and data they rely on to buy and sell what they grow. For example, USDA's Market News — a free service for farmers and ranchers — provides valuable market information to farmers and ranchers who can't afford a team of economists to help them make market decisions. These are decisions that cannot be put on hold: planting, growing and harvesting seasons do not operate on a congressional schedule.

Farm economy hit

This federal shutdown could not come at a worse time for the farm economy. And let's be clear, there is never a good time for our government to shut down. Farmers are facing a serious economic storm right now. Row crop prices are low, production expenses are at record highs, and our markets



The federal government shutdown means farmers can't access several key programs and services. (Courtesy Architect of the Capitol)

have been severely limited by ongoing trade disputes. A shutdown adds another level of uncertainty for farmers who are barely holding on.

Without local USDA offices fully open, farmers cannot weather this storm or prepare for next year. Farmers cannot take out loans, including mortgages and crop loans, which many will be counting on to help pay for supplies to grow next year's crops. A federal shutdown also holds up critical disaster payments for farmers struggling to recover from

drought, hurricanes, fires and floods that have all taken a toll on crops this year. Without these tools and assistance, many farmers will not be able to afford to grow a crop next year.

Security endangered

Farmers want to feed people, and we want to keep farming to keep our food supply secure and sustainable for families across the country. A government shutdown places our food supply at risk. Farming is tough, even under the best circumstances, but the last

several years have been especially hard on farm country with many unable to hold on. According to USDA's most recent Census of Agriculture, we lost 141,000 farms from 2017 to 2022. Since then, we have lost another 20,000. If we continue to lose family farms, we will see more production shift outside our borders. This not only places our food security at risk but also has serious impacts on our nation's sustainability goals. When farms go under, many are then sold for development, and that land never returns to agriculture. In the near term, the shutdown is halting new signups for conservation programs that improve soil health and water quality and help farmers fulfill their commitment to protect our natural resources.

America's farmers are doing everything we can to hold on. We don't shut down when we hit a challenge because we know families across the nation are counting on us to keep growing food for our tables and pantries. We are now counting on Congress to live up to its end of the bargain to reopen the government and ensure America's farms can stay open for the health and security of our nation.

Zippy Duval is president of the American Farm Bureau Federation.



A center pivot in the Harney Basin. Stakeholders are working to save agriculture in the region. (Capital Press file photo)

Harney Basin: Facts over fear

Words like "crisis" and "conflict" may capture attention in headlines, but when they are grounded in fact, they can cause harm. Too often, coverage of the Harney Basin tells only part of the story.

Those who live and work here know the truth is more complex — and far more hopeful.

Contrary to recent portrayals, most of the Harney Basin is not in a groundwater crisis. The basin spans 5,240 square miles. Data show that across 4,715 of those — about 90% — groundwater levels have fallen less than three feet over a 22-year megadrought. Only about 10% of the basin faces significant declines, mainly around Weaver Springs, a 99-square-mile area with highly permeable soils that drain quickly and recharge slowly.

Some wells there have dropped 100 feet, a serious local issue that residents have sought to address for nearly a decade. But these declines do not represent conditions basin-wide. Our community stands ready to partner with the state to manage water sustainably for all.

The Harney Basin is not being over-pumped.

Since 1955, the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) has been responsible for tracking recharge and allocating groundwater for beneficial use. In 2015, OWRD determined that it had likely overallocated "paper" water

GUEST VIEW

Rob Frank



We should view it as a step forward and use language that unites rather than divides.

Groundwater is life in Harney County. It sustains our families, homes, livestock, and businesses. It also supports the springs that feed the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. Many of our farms and ranches have been operating for four, five, or six generations — proof that success in this high-desert landscape depends on stewardship and conservation.

That legacy reflects both economic resilience and a deep respect for the land and water that sustain us all. As a community, we are ready to keep working with the state to address known problems and ensure sustainable groundwater management across the basin. The petition submitted by the county, cities, Burns Paiute Tribe, Malheur Refuge, residents, businesses, and irrigators represents a balanced, collaborative path forward — rooted in science, partnership, and shared responsibility for our water future.

Note: OPB recently reported that 70 wells have lost access to water. These are modeled estimates, not measured data. Since 2022, OWRD has received 16 verified dry-well complaints. Legislative funding established in 2021 has already supported 14 well-replacement projects, with resources remaining for 33 more.

Rob Frank is a Harney County commissioner.

Why Idaho's future depends on its people

From the top of Red Hill, just above Idaho State University's campus, you can see almost everything: the ridges of the Portneuf Valley, the heart of Pocatello, and if you look really close, you can imagine the possibilities of Idaho's future. But what you don't see from that hilltop, at least not right away, are the people and partnerships who make that climb and future possible.

And that's the real story of ISU: purpose, perseverance and partnership. And in today's climate, where the value of higher education is debated, I think it's more important than ever to share why your state university matters and why it's worth investing in.

Let's start with the students.

Every day, I meet students of all types who are first in their families to attend college. Many are working multiple jobs, and some even raise families while still showing up for early-morning classes because they believe in the potential of the future they are creating. I recently heard about a faculty member who noticed one of his students was struggling. Rather than look the other way, he reached out, offered encouragement and helped that student find a class that aligned with their passion. That personal connection kept the student enrolled. That's the strength of a university where students aren't just a number.

Or take the student running our campus food pantry. She's led food drives, built partnerships with donors and launched a campus garden, all while completing her doctoral degree. Her work is feeding our community, both literally and figuratively. That's not some ivory tower idealism; that's real leadership being shaped in a time our communities need it most.

At ISU, we're not climbing alone. We're making the ascent with Idahoans across the state. In fact, some of our most impactful projects are born from partnerships.

When we needed to renovate our cross-country track, it became a community effort. Local businesses stepped in with equipment and labor; our faculty and students worked alongside them, helping design and build the course as part of a real-world academic experience. Yes, it saved money, but more importantly, it gave students invaluable hands-on experience and showed how a university and its community can build something great together—a beautiful track ready to be used by the university and the community.

Or consider our new nurse anesthetist program, the first in Idaho. Local clinics came to us

GUEST VIEW

Robert Wagner



with a problem: a critical shortage of trained professionals. We listened, built the program from the ground up and just welcomed our first class. Local health care professionals are even providing some of the instructors, bringing real-world expertise directly into the classroom. That boots-on-the-ground, collaborative problem-solving with Idaho communities and industry defines ISU.

Higher education is not without its challenges. As a public institution, we face intense scrutiny, tight budgets and shifting expectations. But ISU's not backing down. We're focusing on what matters: increasing access, strengthening research, building meaningful partnerships and making sure every student who walks through our doors feels valued, seen and supported to meet their educational goals in preparation for their future.

And the results speak for themselves. This fall, ISU welcomed its largest first-year undergraduate class since 2011. Student success rates (retention) are at a record high. Research funding is up. And we're planning major infrastructure projects, including a new Life Sciences building, to better serve our students and our state.

For generations, universities have been places where people from different backgrounds come together, exchange ideas and solve problems in a safe and open environment. That spirit of dialogue and innovation is at the heart of Idaho values. The people we educate — nurses, engineers, teachers, business leaders, welders — represent Idaho's future.

Idaho's success depends on our ability to educate Idahoans, to keep our talent here and to prepare the next generation for the challenges ahead.

So the next time you drive past one of our campuses across the state or look up at Red Hill in Pocatello, I hope you'll see more than just buildings and classrooms. I hope you'll see what I see: a climb worth making, a community working together and a future we're building together, step by step.

Because when Idahoans are given the chance to climb, there's no limit to how high they'll go. Let's keep climbing together.

Robert Wagner is president of Idaho State University.