

Earth Forum 2026

The 2026 Earth Forum, held on **April 22, 2026** in the Student Union Building (SUB) / Ballroom, was Idaho State University's first campus wide sustainability forum and the signature event of ISU's inaugural Earth Week, organized by the Office of Sustainability. The main goal of this Earth Week was to increase student engagement, awareness, and action around environmental stewardship. In addition, the Earth Week included student centered activities such as designed Sustainability Sunday and Campus Clean up, outreach events, and the start of **Benny's Closet**, ISU's first Pop - up thrift Store designed to reduce landfill waste through reuse. The Earth Forum alone gathered nearly **300 people**, including student, faculty, staff, community partners, and sustainability leaders. The event supported ISU's Bold Path Forward by emphasizing on financial resilience, environmental responsibility, and community partnership.

The Forum began with keynotes remarks from the campus leaders, including ISU's Sustainability Manager Pallavi Pokharel, Vice President Brian, and research leader Marty Blair, who highlighted ISU's progression operation research and planning. They also recognized achievements like the University's **Bronze STARS** rating, **LEED certified buildings**, majors, energy efficiency upgrades, and ISU's growing national leadership in sustainability research.

After the keynotes, the event moved to a series of panel sessions that covered topics like : sustainability and mental health, academic and research, campus operation, student engagement and native landscapes. Each session included Faculty, staff, community experts who shared insights, answered questions and discussed opportunities for student

involvement in sustainability initiatives.



The Earth Forum also featured student poster presentations on environmental issues, water resilience, waste reduction, and sustainable materials, emphasizing on ISU's student contributions to real world solutions. Together, The Earth Week and the Earth Forum created a new tradition at ISU; an annual and collaborative celebration of sustainability that matches the spirit of the **1970 Earth Day** while supporting the university mission and future goals.

Opening Session: Sustainability at ISU - Collective Efforts & Future Goals
Speaker: *Pallavi Pokharel, ISU's Sustainability Manager*

Pallavi Pokharel opened the Forum by inviting everyone to celebrate ISU's sustainability wins together. She stood before the audience, holding up a reusable bottle, and described the impact of ISU's efforts in sustainability areas such as saving **2.25 million** plastic bottles, adding more than **200** recycling bins across the campus, and achieving prestigious sustainability ratings. Pallavi Pokharel invited everyone to develop a sustainable habit and culture by saying this : “let's build a culture where sustainability is part of who we are.”

Keynote Address : ISU's sustainability Roadmap

Speaker: *Brian (Facility Leadership)*

In his speech, Brian drew the audience's attention to ISU's 125 year journey with stories about lighting upgrades, smart building systems, and the challenge of replacing steam boilers back in the 1940s. He also emphasized on the Leonard Hall building renovation that cost \$ 14 million and previewed the upcoming Life Science Building, encouraging listeners to imagine a campus preparing for the next century of learning and discovery. Brian insisted on the importance of accountability through the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in High Education (**AASHE**), and the Sustainability Tracking Assessment & Rating System (**STARS**) work indicating that “clear reporting is essential for long-term progress.” He also praised Pallavi's leadership and **AASHE** recognition and finally acknowledged the great teamwork behind the event.



Research Keynote : Sustainability, Stewardship, and Innovation

Speaker: Marty Blair (*Vice President of Research and Economic Development*)

Moderator: Office of sustainability

Dr. Marty talked about ISU's national leadership in sustainability research , with \$ 47 million annually for environmental issues. He described current work in water modeling, soil structure, sustainable concrete, and water reuse. The speaker mentioned the university's partnership with the Shoshone Bannock Tribe for sustainable water reuse. In addition, Dr. Blair outlined how ISU's researchers are working side by side with the Shoshone Bannock Tribe and INL experts is shaping the future of energy and water in

the city. He described new achievements or progress by calling ISU's approach as : "Imaginative, innovative, and impactful," and encouraged the audience to think about new research ideas that can happen through teamwork across campus.

Session 1: sustainability & Mental health

Speaker: *Rick Pongtratz*

Moderator: *Pallavi Pokharel*

In this session, Rick Pongtratz PhD LPC; Licensed Psychologist, Director in counseling psychology of ISU's counseling service explained the link between well-being and sustainability. Rick said , "the more we foster a relationship with nature, the more mutually beneficial it becomes." he noted that time in nature reduces stress, lowers blood pressure, and improves children's behavior. Rick also urged participants to spend at least 20 minutes outdoors.

Again, the session addressed how technology affects mental health, emphasizing that doomscrolling and excess screen time harm well-being and environmental awareness. In addition, some plans include adding nature sounds to counseling spaces and holding a baby plant raffle to encourage students to incorporate nature into their routines.

Session 2: Sustainability in academics and research

Speakers: *Doug McGee, Dr. Evan Rodriguez. Assistant Professor of Philosophy. Jared Cantrell. Associate Director for Strategic Partnerships & Innovation.*

Moderator: *Dr. Donna Lybecker*

This panel examined how academic fields can collaborate to promote sustainability. Faculty also discussed ISU's responsiveness to students, civic engagement, and partnerships with INL, state, and federal agencies. Dr. Blair asked about the effect of political polarization on sustainability, leading to a discussion of values, ethics, and economics. Panelists also emphasized the financial value of sustainable projects and the importance of focussing on real impacts.

Session 3: Sustainability and Operation

Panelists: *Facilities, PRT, Recycling, Dining Services*

Moderator: *Chuck Rizzo*

This session shared some ongoing campus sustainability efforts. It recommended energy saving facilities upgrades, reduced water and chemical use, and improved recycling through projects such as tunnel renovation, transformers replacement, and better metering. The PRT suggested on the other hand to reduce car use with free campus bus routes, a real tracking app, and increase student outreach. The Dining services recommended improving food sustainability by tracking waste, clearly separating “green waste: organic waste that is unavoidable” from “Red waste: spoils in the kitchen or is otherwise ruined”, and using this data to compare progress across years. Panelists encouraged also purchasing sustainable products, offering more plant based options , and partnering with Benny’s Pantry to reduce food waste. The panel also discussed addressing high food costs, recycling contamination, and recruiting more regular composting volunteers as key challenges.

Session 4 : Sustainability and Student Engagement

Panelists: *Student Affairs, ASISU, Chemistry Club*

Moderator: Rhea Kalivas

Note Taker: Cheryl Hanson

The student engagement session talked about how students are helping to build ISU’s sustainability culture and where more progress is needed. ASISU president started the discussion by saying that “while some students, like Chemistry Club, the Sustainability Club, and the Sustainability Department are “very dedicated”, others groups show “an apathetic attitude toward sustainability.” Student Affairs on the other hand pointed out the need for more focused conversation stating that there is “a lot of support from students,” but that the university needs to “nudge for an every day effort from all sides of ISU.”

The panel discussed ways to sustain progress, indicating that Lorie has played a major role in advancing sustainability efforts. However, they said that lasting progress will need an appointed team”and steady involvement from staff and faculty. ASISU is considering a sustainability pledge to make student commitment official and to “emphasize the importance of sustainability to ISU students.”



Student leaders emphasized the importance of incorporating sustainability into regular campus life. The ASISU president observed that while some student groups demonstrate strong involvement, others show less interest. This indicates the need for additional outreach efforts and clear communication on the subject. Some of the suggestions made by the president are: campus wide sustainability pledge, monthly power down hours, increased outdoor events, and enhanced collaboration between campus clubs and the office of sustainability.

Session 5 : Rethinking sustainability - Native Landscapes

Panelists: *Sunshine Deney, Elizabeth Lay, Indah*

Moderator: *Charlie Medema*

In this final session, the panelists described the greenhouse as a lively community space where students and staff learn, volunteer, and support one another, sharing stories of harvesting produce for Benny's Pantry and discovering rare herbarium specimens. The suggested restoring Idaho's sagebrush steppes and noted challenges with staffing, space, and the sustainability of student engagement. The suggested key next steps include increasing events visibility, strengthening student partnership, building long term projects leadership, expanding waste reduction programs, and establishing the Earth Forum as an annual event.

Conclusion

ISU's first Earth Forum 2026 brought together more than 200 participants for a day of learning, conversation, and hands-on activities that showed ISU's strong commitment to sustainability. Attendees discovered new recycling bins, shared ideas at Benny's Closet, and felt their voices mattered. Even after the event ended, many people stayed to talk, network, and plan future projects. The Forum showed real progress and established a new tradition where the ISU community works together to shape the next chapter of sustainability.