



EARTH FORUM REPORT 2026



**Idaho State
University**

Environmental Health,
Safety, and Sustainability



OVERVIEW

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.

Speakers and Keynotes

Idaho State University submitted its first Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS) report to The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) at the start of the 2025 calendar year with the goal of receiving a Bronze rating. The STARS report is a voluntary self-reporting tool for institutions globally to measure their sustainability performance. Using the current report as a guide to identify areas of improvement, the Sustainability Office plans to re-submit an updated STARS report for a Silver Rating by the start of CY2028. The updated report will include all satellite campuses in addition to the main Pocatello campus.

Earth Week Events

Idaho State University has not yet set a carbon neutrality goal, but with data-driven insights and collaboration between campus leadership and the Sustainability Office, ISU is working toward establishing a net-zero emissions target that is best suited for our campus and community. We are dedicated to meaningful climate action.

OPENING SESSION

Message from the Sustainability Manager

MESSAGE FROM AY27

Earth Week 2026 marked an important milestone for Idaho State University. It brought together students, faculty, staff, and community partners to celebrate sustainability, share ideas, and inspire action across campus.

The success of Earth Week reflected the strong foundation that already existed at ISU. The university had become a member of AASHE, completed its first STARS assessment, and earned a Bronze rating. These achievements established a baseline for measuring progress and reaffirmed ISU's commitment to continuous improvement in sustainability.

Throughout the week, the campus community highlighted initiatives that were already making a difference, including waste reduction, energy efficiency, student engagement, sustainable infrastructure, and community partnerships. Earth Week also showcased the collective efforts of the many departments, organizations, and individuals working to make sustainability part of everyday campus life.

The inaugural Earth Week demonstrated the value of collaboration and community engagement. It is envisioned as an annual tradition that will continue to educate, inspire, and strengthen Idaho State University's culture of sustainability. Each year will provide new opportunities to celebrate progress, build partnerships, and encourage meaningful action.

This report highlights the events, activities, and outcomes of Earth Week 2026 while recognizing everyone who contributed to its success. Together, we are building a more resilient and sustainable future for Idaho State University.



Pallavi Pokharel

Sustainability Manager

KEYNOTE SPEECH

ISU's Sustainability Roadmap

MESSAGE FROM THE VP

The Vice President for Operations highlighted that sustainability had become an integral part of Idaho State University's long-term vision rather than a separate initiative. As the university celebrated more than 125 years of history, he emphasized a continued commitment to building a campus that was financially resilient, environmentally responsible, and strengthened through partnerships with the community and industry. He also recognized the leadership of the Sustainability Manager and acknowledged her appointment to the AASHE STARS Steering Committee, noting the significance of this achievement for both Idaho State University and the region.

The keynote outlined several operational initiatives that were advancing campus sustainability. These included ongoing lighting retrofits, smart facility management practices, and major infrastructure improvements.

A key focus was the modernization of the Pocatello steam plant, where aging 1940s-era boilers were being replaced to improve energy efficiency across more than 70 campus buildings. Continued efforts to improve waste management and expand the university's e-waste partnership with Idaho National Laboratory were also highlighted.

He also discussed the university's approach to sustainable campus development. Rather than prioritizing new construction, ISU had focused on renovating and extending the life of existing facilities whenever possible. Leonard Hall was presented as an example of this strategy, with a \$14 million renovation designed to modernize the 84-year-old building while improving energy efficiency. Looking ahead, the planned Life Sciences Building was described as a flexible and future-ready facility that aimed to achieve the Pocatello campus's first LEED Silver certification. The address concluded by emphasizing the importance of accountability and continuous improvement. Sustainability was presented as a long-term strategy for responsible stewardship, operational excellence, and the continued growth of Idaho State University.



Brian Sagendorf

Vice President of Operation

KEYNOTE SPEECH

Sustainability, Stewardship, and Innovation

MESSAGE FROM

THE VP

Marty Blair, Vice President for Research and Economic Development, emphasized the critical role of research, innovation, and collaboration in advancing sustainability at Idaho State University. He highlighted how sustainability research addressed real-world challenges while creating opportunities for economic development, industry partnerships, and student success.

He discussed the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, noting that meaningful solutions to environmental and societal challenges required expertise from across the university. He encouraged continued partnerships among faculty, students, community organizations, government agencies, and industry to translate research into practical and lasting impacts.

He also emphasized that investing in research and innovation strengthened both the university and the region. By supporting sustainable technologies, applied research, and workforce development, Idaho State University was helping prepare future leaders while contributing to the economic and environmental resilience of Idaho and beyond.

He concluded by encouraging the campus community to continue embracing innovation, collaboration, and discovery as essential drivers of a more sustainable future.



Martin Blair

Vice President of Research & Economic Development

Earth Week Events List

April 20 Movie Screening: The Lorax (Bengal Theater)

April 21 Benny's Closet, Scrap to Art Workshop, Nature Walk,

April 21 Paint the pebble/plant a pot, Trivia Night

April 21 Movie Screening: Interstellar (Bengal Theater)

April 22 Earth Forum, Tabling Fair, Benny's Closet

April 22 Scrap to Art Workshop, Paint a Pebble/Plant a Pot

April 22 Scavenger Hunt

April 23 Retro Dance

SESSION: 1

SUSTAINABILITY & MENTAL HEALTH

Moderator Pallavi Pokharel

Speaker Rick Pongrtaz

Note Taker Cheryl Hansen

Summary:

This session, led by the Director of Counseling and Mental Health Center, Rick Pongrtaz explored how mental health and environmental wellbeing reinforce each other.

Key Takeaways:

- Time in nature lowers stress and blood pressure and is linked to fewer behavioral issues in children
- Recommended at least 20 minutes outside, practiced mindfully
- Screen time, doomscrolling, and tools like ChatGPT pull attention away from both mental health and the natural world
- Session reinforces the Sustainability Action Plan's existing Engagement goal to partner with Counseling on nature-based mental health outreach
- Counseling Center plans to bring nature indoors: nature sounds playing in the office, a baby plant raffle



Pallavi Pokharel (*Sustainability Manager*) & Rick Pongrtaz (*Director of Counseling & Mental Health Center*) during the session at Earth Forum (Union Ballroom)

SESSION: 2

SUSTAINABILITY IN ACADEMICS & RESEARCH

Moderator Donna Lybecker

Speakers Doug McGee, Evan Rodriguez, Jared Cantrell

Note Taker Cheryl Hansen & Griffin Schirock

Summary:

This session examined how ISU's cross-disciplinary expertise can be mobilized to benefit the broader community, including INL, the state of Idaho, and federal partners. Panelists discussed the university's strength in listening to student concerns and the importance of civic engagement as a driver for both institutional growth and sustainability. A key exchange, prompted by a question from Marty on climate change and political division, explored how sustainability work must be framed around financial value and long-term savings to gain buy-in from administration and students alike, while keeping the focus on real impact on real people.

Takeaways:

- ISU's cross-disciplinary expertise is an underused asset for community benefit.
- Civic engagement for students should be treated as a driver of sustainability, not a separate initiative
- Student-community engagement can improve ISU's standing both locally and in higher education broadly.
- Sustainability projects need clear, quantified dollar value to gain administrative and student buy-in
- Future savings should be communicated as equally valuable as current savings
- Messaging should center on real impact rather than abstract sustainability language
- Political and social division around climate change requires careful, values-based framing.



[from left] Donna Lybecker (Sustainability Manager), Doug McGee, Jared Cantrell, Evan Rodriguez during the session at Earth Forum (Union Ballroom)

SESSION: 3

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE CAMPUS

Moderator Chuck Rizzo

Speakers Darin Cowler, Chris Wagner, Mark Anderson, Laura Bauer

Note Taker Griffin Schirock

Summary:

This panel brought together Facilities, PRT, Recycling, and Chartwells to discuss operational sustainability across campus, covering infrastructure upgrades, waste and recycling programs, transit culture, and food service sustainability. Discussion centered on the shared challenge of balancing cost, aging infrastructure, and behavior change, with each department describing both progress made and ongoing barriers. The session closed with a discussion of ways students can get more directly involved in campus sustainability efforts.

Takeaways:

- Chartwells has already achieved a 20% food waste reduction, working toward 50%, using a green/red waste tracking system by kitchen
- Facilities is upgrading major infrastructure (heat plant, tunnels, transformers) and pursuing green building certification (Bio-building, PA building)
- Aging campus infrastructure (~100 buildings, some 70-100 years old, ~4 million sq ft) is a major sustainability challenge
- Facilities is partnering with an outside company to meter and monitor building-level utility costs, with upgrades funded through shared savings
- PRT identifies "driving culture" as a core barrier and frames transit sustainability as primarily an education and culture issue
- Composting is a recognized opportunity but logistically difficult. Future plans to actively explore a small-scale pilot
- Chartwells' Benny's food pantry donation program is being expanded as a way to reduce food waste
- Rising food costs make sustainable purchasing increasingly difficult for dining operations
- Facilities and panelists welcome direct student engagement, including sitting in on construction projects and touring sustainability initiatives



[from left] Chuck Rizzo; Darin Clower, Lauria Bauer, Chris Wagner, Mark Anderson during the session at Earth Forum (Union Ballroom)

SESSION: 4

SUSTAINABILITY AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Moderator Rhea Kalivas

Speakers Matt Daily, Sky Halter, Veronica Miller

Note Taker Cheryl Hansen & Griffin Schirock

Summary:

This panel focused on the state of sustainability culture among ISU's student body. The ASISU President noted a divide between highly engaged groups, like the Chemistry Club and Sustainability Club, and other student groups that remain largely apathetic toward sustainability. Panelists discussed the need for more intentional, targeted outreach and everyday nudges across campus, including a potential ASISU pledge, alongside concerns about maintaining momentum now that Lorie's leadership has been a key driving force. The session closed with broader ideas for spreading sustainability culture through clubs, new events, and more ambitious, forward-looking initiatives.

Takeaways:

- Student engagement with sustainability is uneven: some groups (Chemistry Club, Sustainability Club) are highly dedicated, others are apathetic
- Need for more intentional, targeted conversations rather than broad general messaging
- A potential ASISU sustainability pledge was raised as a way to formalize student commitment
- Momentum has relied heavily on individual leadership (Lorie); an appointed, ongoing team is needed to sustain progress
- Student employment was flagged as an area where ISU could do more to support sustainability
- Clubs are seen as a key vehicle for spreading sustainability culture campus-wide
- New event ideas proposed: more outdoor events, monthly "power down" hours



[from left] Rhea Kalivas, Veronica Miller, Matt Daily, Sky Halter during the session at Earth Forum (Union Ballroom)

SESSION: 5

SUSTAINABILITY & NATIVE PLANT SPECIES

Moderator Charlie Medema

Speakers Sunshine Deney, Elizabeth Lay, Indah

Note Taker Chris Forshee

Summary:

This session explored how ISU's greenhouse and herbarium support student wellness, community engagement, and Idaho's ecological identity. Sunshine described the greenhouse as a teaching collection that doubles as a wellness refuge and food security resource through a partnership with Benny's pantry, while Indah discussed the herbarium's 80,000+ specimen collection and its role in year-round volunteer engagement. Both emphasized native plant preservation, particularly the sagebrush steppe, as central to Idaho's identity, and closed by naming shared barriers like limited staffing and space, alongside an open invitation for the community to visit and volunteer.

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[from left] Charlie Medema, Sunshine Deney, Indah during the session at Earth Forum (Union Ballroom)



FORWARD VISION

The inaugural Earth Forum showed what's possible when a campus comes together around a shared purpose. Building on the engagement of more than 300 students, we envision the Earth Forum growing from a single annual event into a lasting platform for sustainability dialogue, collaboration, and action at Idaho State University. Moving forward, we aim to deepen partnerships with faculty, student organizations, local government, and community and industry partners so that the Forum reflects a wider range of voices and expertise. We hope to connect Forum conversations more directly to campus initiatives, such as the circular economy program, energy conservation efforts, and sustainability coursework, so that ideas shared at the event lead to measurable projects and outcomes. We also plan to create more hands-on and student-led opportunities, ensuring that participants leave not only informed but empowered to lead change in their classrooms, workplaces, and communities. Through continued growth and reflection, the Earth Forum will help build a campus culture where sustainability is part of how we learn, work, and plan for the future.



We want to give a large thanks to everyone who helped contribute to the efforts that went in to developing this Plan and continue to support our Sustainability journey,

Where to find us:

Website: <https://www.isu.edu/sustainability/>

Instagram: @idahostatesustainability

On Campus: Office of Sustainability, Physical Sciences Complex, Room 105

Instagram

