

Idaho agriculture exports double in last 7 years

By RYAN STRUYK, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Idaho's agricultural exports have more than doubled in the last seven years, officials told a legislative panel Tuesday.

Celia Gould, director of the state agriculture department, told budget-setting lawmakers that Idaho's agriculture exports reached \$2.6 billion dollars in 2013, according to data released Friday.

"That is astounding," she told lawmakers. "In Idaho, agriculture continues to be the bedrock of our cultural and economic way of life."

She also said that farm income is at a record high, and debt to asset ratios are at record lows.

Republican Rep. Marc Gibbs from Grace said the agency "has done a lot with less."

The agricultural department recently underwent a 13 percent budget cut, but still managed large growth, agriculture officials said.

Bureau Chief Laura Johnson pointed to an expanding middle class in places like China, as well as new trade agreements, as key drivers of Idaho's booming agricultural exports.

Gould added the agency inspected 2.5 billion pounds of fresh produce as well as 49,000 watercrafts for invasive species.

She said the growth has created a bigger workload for her employees, prompting her agency to ask for more staff positions.

The state agricultural department is requesting several new staff members, including two people to monitor federal rangelands, a dairy microbiologist and a records specialist.

They are also requesting additional funding for the weights and measures program.

The budget hearing was part of a series of hearing on agency budgets; the budget-setting panel will vote on budgets, including what to fund and what not to fund, in the coming weeks.

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