



BIG SKY CONFERENCE
2491 WASHINGTON BLVD, SUITE 201
OGDEN, UT, 84401

CONTACT: JON KASPER
ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER/MEDIA RELATIONS
801.392.1978 x-16
JKASPER@BIGSKYCONFERENCE.ORG



[FACEBOOK.COM/BIGSKYCONF](https://www.facebook.com/BIGSKYCONF)



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UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO TO RETURN IN 2014

OGDEN, Utah (Oct. 19, 2012) - The University of Idaho will return to the Big Sky Conference on July 1, 2014 league Commissioner Doug Fullerton and UI President M. Duane Nellis announced Friday.

The majority of Idaho's intercollegiate athletic teams will begin Big Sky Conference play during the 2014-15 academic year. The Vandal football program will play as an Independent at the Bowl Subdivision level of Division I football.

The University of Idaho will become the Big Sky's 12th member. The Big Sky currently consists of 11 core institutions plus Cal Poly and UC Davis as football affiliate members.

The Big Sky was founded on July 1, 1963 with charter members Idaho, Idaho State, Gonzaga, Montana, Montana State and Weber State. Idaho left the Big Sky following the 1995-96 athletic season. Since July of 2005, the Vandals have been members of the Western Athletic Conference.

"We welcome The University of Idaho back to the Big Sky, a conference where it excelled athletically and academically for more than 30 years as a flagship member," said Big Sky Conference Commissioner Doug Fullerton. "President Duane Nellis and Athletics Director Rob Spear have faced some very difficult challenges as the conference landscape has shifted. Both are to be commended for finding a stable home with a strong academic and athletic future. Our current membership can't wait to begin renewing old rivalries and developing new relationships with the Vandals."

"We are pleased to announce the renewal of our partnership with the Big Sky Conference," said Nellis, who signed the agreement - at the league's Oct. 16 meeting at Park City, Utah, to move the Vandals to the Big Sky beginning with the 2014-15 school year. "As one of the six charter members, our relationship with the Big Sky is a long and storied one. Our student-athletes won team titles and individual championships, and were honored for their academic successes during our original 32 years in the league. We look forward to the same on-field and in-the-classroom achievement as we rejoin the Big Sky."

The Vandals enjoyed years of success in the Big Sky, winning four regular-season and postseason men's basketball championships. The 1981-82 Idaho men's basketball team ascended to sixth in the Associated Press Top 25 season during a 27-3 campaign.

While in the Big Sky, Idaho won 10 Big Sky Conference men's tennis championships, three men's outdoor track and field titles, one men's indoor track and field championship, two men's cross country championships, three regular-season volleyball titles as well as four postseason volleyball titles. The Vandals also won multiple titles in baseball, men's skiing, and men's swimming and diving, sports the Big Sky no longer sponsors.

Idaho won the Big Sky Men's All-Sports Trophy in 1965-66 and again in 1989-90. The Vandals captured the Combined Men's and Women's All-Sports Trophy in 1989-90.

“For decades Idaho enjoyed very successful athletics teams across the board in the Big Sky Conference,” said Fullerton. “We expect the Vandals to enjoy success in our league again. Travel for Idaho supporters will be much easier as it plays the likes of Eastern Washington, Portland State, Idaho State, Montana and Montana State.

Idaho’s rivalries with some current Big Sky members date back more than 100 years. Idaho and Eastern Washington first played in men’s basketball in 1905. The first Montana-Idaho men’s basketball game was in 1916, and a year later the Vandals played Montana State for the first time.

“The Big Sky is a conference rich in its history and successes,” said Idaho Athletics Director Rob Spear. “Returning to the Big Sky allows us to renew regional and historic rivalries. Some of these rivalries date back more than 100 years and are a significant part of our legacy as Vandals.”

Idaho’s women’s basketball team began playing Eastern Washington, Montana and Montana State in 1975. The Vandals first participated against Portland State in 1979, and Idaho State in 1979. In 1976, Idaho’s volleyball team began playing Eastern Washington, Montana, Montana State and Portland State. A year later, Idaho and Idaho State played for the first time on the volleyball court.

“Another dimension of this decision was for our student-athletes,” Nellis said. “As far as travel, it allows them much more opportunity to participate in sports while reducing the amount of time away from classes. I think that’s an important part of this decision as well.”

The Big Sky Conference added the University of North Dakota and Southern Utah as full members on July 1, 2012. Cal Poly and U.C. Davis joined as football-affiliate members on the same date. The league has undergone a major rebranding campaign spearheaded by SME Branding

“It was important to see the quality of schools that the Big Sky has added,” Nellis said. “The Big Sky is truly emerging as one of the major conferences in the West. That was certainly something that added to our decision-making. It makes sense in so many ways.”

The Big Sky Conference has already begun the process of exploring a move to a two-division, six-team format starting in 2014-15 for sports such as basketball and volleyball.