



Looking down from Galena Summit, Teri Murrison, 2011

MULTIPLE PARTNERS, FUNDERS MAKE POLE CREEK PROJECT A SUCCESS

By Steve Stuebner

Mark and Mike Henslee run a large cattle and sheep ranch called the Salmon Falls Land & Livestock Company, based in Hagerman. As part of their operation, which stretches from the Owyhee desert to the Sawtooth National Forest, they've got a valuable patch of irrigated summer range on the north side of Galena Summit in the Pole Creek drainage, near the Smiley Creek Lodge.

More than 5 years ago, it became apparent that the Henslees would need to renew a special use permit to operate an irrigation diversion located on U.S. Forest Service land in the Sawtooth National Recreation Area. Because use of the diversion has an impact on chinook salmon and steelhead runs in the headwaters of the Salmon River, the permit renewal raised both a challenge and an opportunity to improve water flows at the diversion to help the fish and sustain the Henslee's summer grazing operation.

"The Pole Creek area is very important to our summer operation, June through October," says Mike Henslee. "We run yearlings up there and it's good quality feed. We put about 3 pounds per day on our yearlings."

The old irrigation diversion didn't leave a lot of water left in Pole Creek when adult chinook were swimming upstream to spawn, and low flows also were a barrier for juvenile fish seeking cold water in the hot summer months, according to Idaho Fish and Game officials.

"This project will enhance over 10 miles of spawning and rearing habitat in the headwaters of the Salmon River," adds Paddy Murphy, manager of the IDFG Screen Shop in Salmon. "On Pole Creek, it's a rare thing to be able to do ag improvements for livestock while at the same time, open the door for chinook salmon to spawn and juvenile fish to find

cold water during the rearing phase. It's a very exciting project."

Knowing the project would be challenging, Mark Moulton, fisheries and watershed program lead for the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, pulled together a group of agency officials prior to commencing a NEPA process for renewing the special use permit for the irrigation diversion. He invited technical specialists from several state and federal agencies, and Native American tribes including: the National Marine Fisheries Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Governor's Office of Species Conservation, Idaho Department of Water Resources, and Idaho Fish and Game to see if they could reach consensus on what the fish needed in Pole Creek.

"We all sat down and worked out the details on what things needed to be addressed in Pole Creek," Moulton says, "both on the private lands and on Nation-

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al Forest". "We wanted to define a bar that says, recovery for the fish is possible. The most challenging question was, how much water do we need for fish?"

Once the experts from these diverse agencies had agreed to the goals, including the optimum flow, Moulton met with the Henslees to see if they would be interested and willing to explore creative solutions. Renewal of their 20-year permit for the irrigation diversion was a primary incentive for the landowners. "They are progressive ranchers, so they were willing to talk about it and explore solutions," Moulton said.

With some concepts in hand, about four years ago, Karma Bragg with the Custer Soil & Water Conservation District pulled together a variety of additional partners to begin planning the irrigation improvement project for Pole Creek, while working closely with the Henslees, the Forest Service and fish agencies. She reached out to NRCS, IDFG, OSC, IDWR, the Idaho Water Resources Board, USFWS, ITD, and the Bureau of Reclamation. Early in the process, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribe got involved in the implementation phase as well. At least 10 agencies were participating by the time the project was completed last fall.



One of two new water wells installed.

Here are key project components:

- The Henslees drilled two new water wells to sustain their irrigation water when natural summer flows decline in Pole Creek. With the help of the wells, a minimum flow of approximately 18 cubic feet per second will be maintained in Pole Creek during the summer months to ensure there is enough flow for chinook salmon to move upstream or spawn in

Pole Creek. With design assistance from the Bureau of Reclamation, the Custer SWCD financed the wells, irrigation and stockwater improvements.

- New electrical power for the wells and irrigation system was required. A commercial connection was made via a buried supply line on a neighbor's property, providing substantial savings for the installation. The commercial power replaced the former smaller hydropower source that was generated with Pole Creek water, allowing these flows to be returned to the creek. Custer SWCD took the lead with the installation of the power.



New pivots were installed.

- The new irrigation strategy required replacing the old pivot sprinklers with new ones to improve efficiency. In order to protect the spectacular scenery within the valley, the Henslees painted the pivot sprinklers brown near Idaho Highway 75. The new pivot layout also avoided Pole Creek, unlike the former system whose wheeled towers crossed directly through Pole Creek in many locations. NRCS and Custer SWCD helped with funding these improvements. The paint cost the Henslees an extra \$10,000.
- Eliminating the irrigation diversion that blocked fish passage, installing a new fish-friendly headgate and installing new irrigation pipelines to send water to pivot sprinklers in the Henslee's meadows on private land. The Bonneville Power Administration helped with funding those improvements. IDFG installed a new fish screen on the diversion to protect juvenile fish from getting diverted into an irrigation ditch when they're migrating to the ocean.



A new diversion structure was installed.

- Removing a culvert that blocked fish from migrating upstream during low-flow periods and replacing it with a clear-span bridge. With design assistance from the Bureau of Reclamation, the Shoshone-Bannock tribes helped fund that aspect of the project. The replacement also provided an opportunity to restore flow to a stream meander severed decades ago when the culvert had been installed. Upstream on National Forest, the Sawtooth NRA replaced four additional culverts that prevented fish movements.
- The Idaho Department of Water Resources and the Water Board assisted with water rights and the water transactions program to make the ground water-to-surface water conversion possible.
- The Shoshone-Bannock Tribe installed fencing on both sides of more than two miles of the Pole Creek riparian area, with a 35-foot setback from the stream, to protect the stream, spawning beds and stream-bank from livestock.
- Installation of new off-site water troughs for cattle to use for drinking. NRCS, Custer SWCD and USFWS helped with those improvements.
- The Henslees were also responsible for taking down all livestock pasture fences during the construction phase of the project in the summer of 2015, and then re-installing the fences afterwards that correspond to the new system. That work is still under way.
- No livestock grazing occurred in the summer of 2015 on the Henslee's private property to allow room for construction, installation of pivots and pipelines, etc.
- Meanwhile upstream, the Sawtooth

POLE CREEK, *cont. from Pg. 2*

NRA addressed other fundamental problems on the National Forest. Trail bridges were installed in key locations within the ATV trail network to allow the closure and rehabilitation of more than 10 fords through Pole Creek. Similarly, a mile of the main Pole Creek road was also relocated from its streamside location.

A lot of the work required sacrifices by the landowners to make the projects work. "It's kind of like starting over from scratch," Henslee says. "We had to pull out all of the old pivots and fencing, disassemble all of that stuff and haul it out."

The Henslees purchased only a few yearlings last year, knowing they wouldn't have a place to graze them in the summer. This year, they will increase the yearling herd to operate for a full summer season. At the end of the construction, the Henslees hooked up the water flows with the pipelines and pivots to test the system.

"We had the full thing running for 24 hours," he said. "It should work fine."

Moulton and Bragg kept the Henslees informed and involved in every step of the project to make sure they were comfortable with everything. In the last several years, that meant lots of coordination meetings, too. They often met in Mackay to save everyone travel time.

"The Henslees have invested a considerable amount of time and money in the project, Bragg notes. "They are very progressive guys. They're very forward-thinking."

Still, it was a big gut-check for the Custer SWCD board to move forward with the project, too, she says, knowing that project had so many moving parts, agencies and approvals. "We all took a deep breath before we signed the contract, wondering if this was the right thing to do for us and the landowners," she says.

The Governor's Office of Species Conservation helped with securing the BPA funds for the irrigation aspect of the project. Staffer Mike Edmondson "and OSC were instrumental in securing the funding so we could do the whole construction aspect of project in one year," Bragg says.

A big challenge associated with the proj-

ect involved getting a special-use permit from the Sawtooth NRA to renew the irrigation diversion on Pole Creek on Forest Service land. Moulton took the lead on the permitting aspect of the project, which helped steer the group through many special regulations. An Environmental Assessment was completed under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), meaning that the project would be subject to public appeal and potential litigation.

The early meetings that Moulton set up with project partners made the NEPA process pretty smooth, he said. "The early communication made all the difference."

A stream-alteration permit and floodplain conditional-use permits also were required from Blaine County, which could have been problematic. But in the end, the Blaine County Commissioners approved the permits to allow the construction to proceed in 2015. "What a great project. You guys are doing a really good service," Commissioner Jacob Greenberg told the Henslees, according to an article in the Idaho Mountain Express. "I think everybody wins from this."

If the Henslees had tried to renew their special-use permit without making all the changes to improve fish passage and irrigation system, the project likely would not have been approved, Bragg said, because of the Endangered Species issues with chinook salmon and steelhead. "Status quo wouldn't have worked," she said.

Taking a watershed approach should really improve spawning conditions for adult salmon and steelhead, and rearing conditions for tiny juvenile salmon, Murphy says. Pole Creek has at least as much water in it as the Salmon River itself in the headwaters, so to increase the flow of Pole Creek in that area will have a positive impact, he said.

"Pole Creek is the largest tributary of the Salmon River in the headwaters," he said. "This is a real keystone project."

The new summer flows on Pole Creek will be about three times larger than they have been in the past, Moulton said. "That's a pretty substantial increase," he says. "All of the experts agree that's sufficient for fish recovery."



Pole Creek partners from left: Cheryl Philps, Rick Philps, Custer District; Rosanna Reith, Mark Olson, NRCS; Mark Henslee, Salmon Falls Land and Livestock.

The big challenge for Bragg was that she had two really complex projects going on at the same time. "Each project was going on, on separate ends of the district," she says. "Pole Creek was probably one of the most complicated projects I've worked on with large amounts of money involved. It was intimidating, but in the end, it was rewarding."

In fact, the Sawtooth NRA gave the Custer SWCD a conservation award in 2015 in recognition of the work they did on the project. The Henslees received a Sustaining Forests and Grasslands External award from the Intermountain Region of the Forest Service in Ogden, Utah. And then the full partnership group received the 2015 Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts Partnership Award presented at this year's annual IASCD conference.

The silver lining that came from all of the many partners working together on the Pole Creek project is that the inter-agency group plans to use a similar model on future projects, Moulton said. "We want to use our experience from this project moving forward to other tributaries in the Salmon River Basin," he said. "It's a great model!" □

Steve Stuebner is a regular contributor to Conservation the Idaho Way, writing voluntary conservation success stories.

2015: ALL IN ALL, A VERY GOOD YEAR

Each January we pause and reflect back on what our hardworking team has accomplished in the previous year. We ask: have we achieved what we set out to do in our three Core Functions (serve districts, provide programs and services, and administer the agency)? Have we built support for voluntary conservation? Our answers for 2015 were yes, and yes.

CORE FUNCTIONS A look at our [FY 2015 Performance Measurements Report](#) shows that we are on the right track.

District Support Funds were distributed to districts on time without mishap. They received an additional \$50,000 in Trustee

and Benefit funding in FY 2015. Eleven field staff provided technical assistance hours (about ½ of that requested by districts), helped 40 districts with projects, initiated 81 new projects, worked on 106 ongoing projects, and served 229 landowners.

The majority of districts – 74% - were satisfied with the Commission’s services, though roughly 17% expressed some dissatisfaction likely due to our constrained resources. Nine percent of districts were neutral.

CONSERVATION PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Highlights include:

- Resource Conservation & Rangeland Development Program (RCRDP) Seven applications were awarded a total of \$392,517 in low interest conservation loans in FY 2015. We received 48 new loan inquiries – many of those requiring considerable due diligence - and got 20 completed applications, 6 of which were denied or withdrawn. We had 83 active loans for a total of \$3.36 million loaned out in FY 2015.
- Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) Program numbers remained steady despite high commodity prices discouraging participation. We ended FY 2015 with 155 contracts, 16,729 acres enrolled, 7 contracts certified as meeting program goals, and a total of 300 contracts (on 8,800 acres) of certified acres.
- Total Maximum Daily Load Implementation Plan Program (TMDL I-Plan) Streamlining the process, staff completed 8 TMDL I-Plans, 16 were in various stages of development, and 18 were pending.
- Ground Water Quality/Nitrate Priority Areas A total of 39,863 acres were treated reducing nitrates by 138,247#, reducing Phosphorus by 27,745#, and reducing sediments by 143,687 tons.

BUILDING SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION

We continued to utilize social media and distributing this newsletter monthly to over 600 digital subscribers to build support for voluntary conservation and keep districts informed about the accomplishments of other districts. Articles were republished in the Idaho Farm Bureau’s and other publications.

We made presentations before 6 House and Senate Legislative Committees, and conducted an annual Listening Session at the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts’ annual conference. The Board and staff brainstormed with partners prior to reviewing and updating our Strategic Plan in May 2015.

Potential new conservation partners were engaged via a 4-state Conservation Tour and Summit. The final day of the Tour featured a day-long Summit attended by a wide variety of potential partners including state and federal agencies, nonprofits, and representatives from conservation organizations from surrounding states. The Tour and Summit led to talk with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Idaho State Department of Agriculture (ISDA), the Idaho Coalition of Land Trusts, and others. It led to discussing collaborating between ISDA and districts to conduct rangeland monitoring training to landowners, and also laid the groundwork for several regional wildfire recovery multiple agency efforts after Idaho’s severe fires last summer.

So yes, we accomplished the usual day to day activities, but also positioned the Commission and traditional partners on a trajectory to increase our involvement in voluntary conservation in Idaho: making for a very good year. □

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