

ROCKING R8 RANCH: DOING CONSERVATION THE IDAHO WAY ON MICA CREEK

Family ranch takes big voluntary strides in improving water quality in Mica Creek near Coeur d'Alene Lake.

When ranchers Larry and Sherry Mundt discovered that Mica Creek had water-quality problems 10 years ago, they turned to Idaho conservation experts for technical assistance, and then went to work. A major tributary of Coeur d'Alene Lake, Mica Creek was placed on the state's 303(d) list of degraded waters because of bacteria and sediment issues in the late 1990s. The Rocking R8 Ranch, established by Sherry's family, includes a long stretch of Mica Creek.

A water quality implementation plan was created in 2002 which recommended ways of reducing sediment and bacteria through the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) process. The plan recommended a number of voluntary best management practices (BMPs) for property owners living along the stream.

About the same time, rancher Larry Mundt began working with Mark Hogen, water quality resource conservationist for the Idaho Soil & Water Conservation Commission in Coeur d'Alene, to see what could be done to improve water quality in the stream.

"We didn't know what to do," Mundt says. "It was great to work with the Soil and Water Conservation Commission to get their expertise and engineering."

"This ranch family is all about taking care of the creek," Hogen says. "They're neat people. What they say, they do."

Results More than a decade later, numerous improvements on Mica Creek have reduced sediment loads by 827 cubic yards on an annual basis, and phosphorous levels by 718 pounds annually, according to the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ).

They made those gains by reducing stream bank erosion on approximately 2,170 feet of Mica Creek by installing a number of best management practices and erosion-control techniques. They also fenced 3.4 miles of the stream to exclude livestock, planted trees and shrubs in the riparian area, created eight livestock water sites away from the creek,

installed hardened livestock creek-crossings and developed a ranch-wide grazing management plan.

Bacteria levels in the stream from the Mundt's livestock should be minimal after about 80 head of livestock were excluded from the stream, Hogen says. Now DEQ officials may be looking at the possibility of delisting Mica Creek from the state's 303(d) list of impaired waters because of the improvements. "That's huge," Hogen notes.

Exemplary stewards "The Mundts are exemplary ranchers and stewards of their land. They've been proactively and systematically reducing stream bank erosion on Mica Creek for years," says Teri Murrison, administrator of the Idaho Soil & Water Conservation Commission.

Larry Mundt "is a model rancher when it comes to conservation, and he's a heck of a nice guy," adds Bob Flagor, administrator for the Kootenai-Shoshone Soil & Water Conservation District. "They really have gone the extra mile. And all of the agencies involved have pitched in to make this 10-year project a success."

Best management practices Stream-improvements on Mica Creek are emblematic of the kinds of enhancements necessary to reduce sediment loads, phosphorous levels, bacteria levels and other issues that lead to streams and water bodies being placed on Idaho's list of degraded waters. A lawsuit in the 1990s led to the placement of 962 stream segments being listed on Idaho's 303(d) list. The Clean Water Act requires Idaho DEQ to protect water quality in the state's waters so they support beneficial uses such as swimming, fishing and aquatic life.

The creation of TMDL water quality plans for degraded waters is the first step in addressing issues such as excess sediment or high stream



temperature. And then, agencies such as the Conservation Commission, local soil and water conservation districts and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) all have resources to assist landowners in crafting voluntary conservation plans and developing an array of BMPs to reduce sediment, bacteria, phosphorous and other issues in the water bodies.

The Conservation Commission is designated as the lead agency to develop agricultural BMPs in TMDL plans statewide to address water quality issues. Since the 1990s, the Commission has completed approximately 90 TMDL plans regarding specific measures to reduce agricultural impacts on water quality, and the staff is developing another four TMDL plans this year (*see TMDL Agricultural Implementation Plan Status Map, page 2*).

Funding A big issue in crafting solutions to water quality issues on farms and ranches is how to pay for improvements. The Mica Creek story helps illustrate what kinds of financial assistance may be available.

- In 2001, the Ratliff Family LLC (Sherry Mundt's family, owners of the Roaring R8 Ranch) agreed to a 6-year Water Quality Program for Agriculture (WQPA) contract and overall conservation plan. This plan targeted livestock exclusion to the creek and grazing management. BMP's included riparian fencing, spring developments, off-creek watering facilities, livestock stream crossings, and a ranch-wide grazing plan. The WQPA contract was \$62,590, and the landowner came up with matching funds of \$64,430.

- In 2006, Larry Mundt was awarded a 2-year, \$105,752 grant from the Basin Environmental Improvement Project Commission to begin stream bank protection work on eroding Mica Creek banks. This was the Mica Creek Nutrient Reduction Project Phase I. DEQ was the project manager of the Clean Water Act grant fund and Idaho Department of Transportation settlement funds. The Kootenai-Shoshone Soil and Water Conservation District (KSSWCD) administered the grant. The Natural Resources Conservation Service provided the engineering designs. During the project, a DVD was produced highlighting the work done by Mundt and his innovative use of a coffer dam.

- In 2009, Mundt received a \$91,080 water quality grant from DEQ Section 319 funds to continue stream bank protection work. This was called the Mica Creek Nutrient Reduction Project, Phase II, completed successfully in Fall 2011. The KSSWCD administered the grant. Mica Bay Homeowners provided matching funds of \$35,000 for the project, the landowner provided a \$13,220 match, and ISWCC/ KSSWCD/ DEQ provided in-kind match of \$12,500.

“What started out as a TMDL issue resulted in more than 10 years of excellent conservation work by one proactive ranch family,” Hogen says. “These efforts prove once again the value of the four-way partner-

ship between the Conservation Commission, NRCS, local conservation districts and property owners.”

Fish, neighbors impressed Beyond the water-quality improvements, Hogen and Mundt were pleased to see kokanee salmon moving into Mica Creek again to spawn after a hiatus of many years. No one knows exactly why the fish returned, Hogen says, but their presence certainly seems to indicate a “more healthy stream environment.”

Another positive aspect is that Mundt’s conservation work is inspiring adjacent landowners to get involved. A new water-quality grant was recently awarded to an adjacent landowner to work on soil and water conservation issues.

The conservation work on Mica Creek has served as an excellent educational resource for the local area. A number of tours have been held to show other property owners what can be done to address stream bank erosion and other issues. Mundt’s use of coffer dams during the stream bank work allowed resident fish to pass through work sites without interference.

This is a best management practice that could be adopted in other projects, Hogen says.

Model behavior The Mundt’s conservation work also was commended by the Idaho DEQ. Noting that Mica Creek is the third largest tributary to Lake Coeur d’Alene, excluding the St. Joe and Coeur d’Alene watersheds, the creek “is a considerable source of nutrients and sediments to Coeur d’Alene Lake,” DEQ officials said. “As such, the efforts you have put forth on your property are a significant contribution to the goals of the Coeur d’Alene Lake Management Plan ... Thank you for all that you have done and have committed to do to improve water quality within the Mica Creek watershed.”

To get accolades from Idaho DEQ feels good, Mundt says. “I’m very proud to get that kind of recognition from independent inspectors,” he says. “This was a complicated project. It was great that we got the cooperation of everyone involved, including our neighbors in Mica Bay.”

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FY 2015 BUDGET REQUEST

Commissioners approved the Conservation Commission's FY 2015 Budget Request at their August meeting. The Commission request was basically unchanged from FY 2014's with a few exceptions:

District Matching Funds. Because repeated full 2:1 match requests have not been funded, the IASCD Board requested the Conservation Commission adopt a phased-in multi-year matching funds request strategy that over time would allow districts to secure additional general funds. An additional \$60,000 is requested in FY 2015 to be distributed equally among all 50 districts.

Agricultural Pollution Abatement Plan Update. The Conservation Commission requested \$28,000 to hire a firm to update the Plan and conduct significant stakeholder outreach. Every ten years, the Idaho Agricultural Pollution Abatement Plan (Ag Plan) is scheduled to be updated. The current version of the Ag Plan was printed in March 2003. It's the implementation action plan for all nonpoint source agricultural activities in the state. The Ag Plan describes a voluntary approach for addressing agricultural water quality challenges.

Finally, funding for two replacement vehicles was requested. If awarded, two field trucks, each with over 150,000 miles on their odometers, will be replaced.

The budget request will be incorporated (after any necessary modifications) into the Governor's recommended budget and considered by the Legislature in the next legislative session. □

SEPT. COMMISSION MEETING IN BUHL

The next regular meeting of the Conservation Commission Board will be held on Thursday, September 12th, from 9 am -12 pm MT in Buhl.

The Commission holds field meetings around the state to learn about regional conservation issues and strengthen partner relationships. The last field meeting was held in Sandpoint in June 2011.

Lunch will follow the meeting and a tour is planned for the afternoon. For more information on the meeting and tour, check out our website at www.swc.idaho.gov or contact us at 332-1790. □

STAFF PROFILE

MARK HOGEN

Water Quality Resource Conservationist

Our people are passionate about Idaho, Agriculture, and voluntary conservation. In short, they're what make things happen around here. This month we feature one of our favorite go-to-guys, Mark Hogen. He's a committed conservationist and an institutional asset: he's been with the Conservation Commission since March 1988! — Editor

Where do you live? My home is in Hayden, Idaho. My office is located within the USDA Farm Service Center in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

Briefly describe your job responsibilities. Assisting districts, NRCS, and private landowners to install soil and water conservation projects on the ground.

What do you like about your job? Building trust and working relationships with private landowners.

What are your passions in life? Family, hunting, fishing, camping and conservation.

What is your favorite thing about Idaho? All of Idaho's precious water, scenery, wildlife and public lands.

What's the favorite conservation project you've worked on for the Commission? Anything related to the Water Quality



Program for Agriculture [WQPA]! My favorite projects were my very first two, both million-dollar WQPA's with the Yellowstone Soil Conservation District in 1988-1998. These 10-year projects targeted cropland BMP implementation on Upper Conant Creek and Squirrel Creek. Landowner participation was over 90% for both sub-watersheds. This was a tremendous learning experience for me and a great partnership effort.

Tell us about your family. I have been married for 40 years to my lovely wife Vicki. We have three children: David, Melissa and Kari Jo, and two grandsons: Bryce and Brayden. My son David lives in Powell, Wyo., and is a district ranger for the Forest Service. My daughters both live and work in Coeur d'Alene.

If money were no object, what would you do to improve the farms, ranches or natural resources in your area? I would financially support the rural way of life with an emphasis on natural resources conservation and preserving open spaces. □

DID YOU KNOW?

Since 1999, the conservation partnership has sown seeds of stewardship amounting to over \$30.5 million worth of projects benefiting water quality in Idaho! Contributions included:

- Since 1998 SWCC has written 90 TMDL Implementation Plans for water quality impaired streams with adjacent agricultural and grazing land use areas - 22 of them in the last four years. Last year, we completed five plans, had 19 in progress, with 31 on deck (pending). \$13.1 million from SWCC (State Agricultural Water Quality Program, Water Quality Protection for Agriculture programs) has gone toward implementation.
- If all goes well, it takes an average of nine months to complete a single TMDL Implementation Plan.
- Idaho's Water Quality Program for Agriculture (WQPA) helped Idahoans treat over 638,457 acres or 997 square miles of private property in the program's 12 years of existence. It was a true joint effort – all partners had "skin in the game": landowners contributed \$9,537,388, while the state matched \$8,726,408, and the federal government contributed \$5,774,183. The total of combined funding for WQPA projects over those 12 years was over \$25,000,000! The WQPA is no longer active due to funding constraints. □

DISTRICT SHOUT-OUT!

Clark Soil Conservation District gets a well-deserved *atta-district!* this month for their continued commitment to battle noxious weeds! A \$10,000 donation to the Clark County Weed Department will purchase biological (insects) and chemical control agents to continue the war on noxious weeds.

Noxious weeds are non-native plants that are invasive, competitive, and very hard to control once established. They lower property values, decrease agricultural production, degrade wildlife habitat, threaten native plants, reduce enjoyment of recreational areas and create public health hazards. Spotted knapweed, leafy spurge, Russian knapweed, Canada thistle, yellow toadflax, Dalmatian toadflax, houndstongue, and dyer's woad are among the noxious weeds targeted by Clark and surrounding counties.

With state and federal budgets tight these days, Clark stepped up for a second year in a row to provide funding to continue the war on noxious weeds That's Conservation the Idaho Way! ☐

GOT PROJECT PHOTOS?

Do you have photos of projects we can use? We're getting ready for the Commission's annual legislative presentations this year and need good quality before and after photos of your projects! Last year we tailored our presentations to include fact sheets on every district (compiled from district performance reports) and photos from every legislative district represented on the various committees. It was a big hit and we plan to do it again.

Jan Webster will contact district admins soon to begin collecting photos and information. Thanks for your help! ☐

DISTRICT SURVEY RESULTS

Results are in from the Commission's annual District Survey. This year, 40 of Idaho's 50 district boards formally responded with their opinions on some topics and assessed how we're doing at meeting the goals in our Strategic Plan. The results were interesting. Most of the questions were new this year, however a question about their overall satisfaction was also asked in FY 2012.

This year's responses indicated a downward trend or movement to neutrality in overall district satisfaction, likely related to our initiation of a first-ever formal process to allocate field staff technical and other assistance. Working with districts, the process is now being evaluated for changes. Here's what 4/5 of Idaho's conservation district boards told us in the survey.

- 75% think Idaho's mix of regulations and voluntary conservation activities best ensure good air and water quality, and protect habitat and wildlife.
- 92.5% are very or somewhat familiar with SWCC's mission (*to facilitate coordinated non-regulatory, voluntary, and locally-led conservation ...to conserve, sustain, improve, and enhance soil, water, air, plant, and animal resources*).
- 82.5% think SWCC provides opportunities to share info about district activities via listening sessions, partner reports, attending tours and visiting districts, conducting trainings, and monthly field staff presentations at district meetings. 12.5% are neutral, and 5% either somewhat or strongly disagreed.
- 75% feel SWCC is inclusive - asking districts to be part of work groups, comment on new policies and processes, and provide input on key decisions impacting districts. 15% are neutral, and 7.5% somewhat or strongly disagree.
- Commission staff: 57.5% feel the state office is helpful, responsive, and communicates well with districts (32.5% are neutral and 10% either somewhat or strongly disagree). 72.5% feel SWCC's statewide district support is helpful and responsive (20% are neutral, and 7.5% either somewhat or strongly disagree). District satisfaction with SWCC engineering expertise and services is 32.5% (40% are neutral, and 7.5% disagree). 87.5% of districts are strongly or somewhat satisfied with the expertise and services provided by SWCC field staff (10% are neutral, and 2.5% somewhat disagree). Neutral rankings are higher in this category (possibly related to districts' less frequent interaction with statewide staff), and the majority of districts' are satisfied with our field staff. In addition, not all districts utilize engineering services, possibly leading to neutral responses.
- 42.5% are strongly or somewhat satisfied with SWCC's work on TMDL Implementation Plan development (35% are neutral, 10% somewhat disagree, and 12.5% said the question is not applicable.) 55% strongly or somewhat agree that SWCC's TMDL work benefits them, 25% are neutral, and 12.5% are dissatisfied. 7.5% feel the question is not applicable.
- 62.5% agree strongly or somewhat that they are satisfied with SWCC's services and support. 30% are neutral, and 7.5% somewhat disagree. In FY 2012, those satisfied or somewhat satisfied with overall SWCC services and support were 81%. Those ranking their satisfaction as "neutral" were 15%, and districts that were somewhat dissatisfied or dissatisfied were 4%. ☐

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