

PRESERVATIONIST EMBRACES CONSERVATION THE IDAHO WAY ON FAMILY RANCH

Conservation means different things to different people. To some it's strictly the preservation of wild places, while to others it's good stewardship and management of natural resources. To Craig Gehrke, it's now both. He's been a dedicated professional preservationist for years, but negotiating Senator Crapo's Owyhee Initiative with ranching, recreation, tribal, and other interests illustrated he was open to consensus and shared benefits. Since then, personal experience has given him an appreciation for the work Idaho conservation partners have been doing since 1939: Conservation the Idaho Way!

By Steve Stuebner

Craig Gehrke has spent more than 30 years in a land-conservation career -- working to set aside more wilderness in Idaho for The Wilderness Society and focusing on forest and range management issues on public lands. But Gehrke recently learned firsthand about the potential for implementing conservation measures on private lands -- on his family's ranch near Cottonwood.

When Gehrke's parents died in 2011 and 2012, he and his wife, Pam, were faced with a vexing choice -- would they sell the family ranch on Cottonwood Butte or keep it? Their kids love visiting the place, and Gehrke felt uneasy about letting it go, considering his family had owned it for close to a century.

"For something that's been in your family for 100 years, you don't make that decision lightly," Gehrke says. "But we didn't want it to turn into a money pit either."

The 240-acre ranch is located on Lawyers Creek on the west flank of Cottonwood Butte, near Cottonwood. The headwaters of the creek actually flow from the Gehrke property. Gehrke checked with the Idaho County Soil and Water Conservation District office in Grangeville and discovered there



Craig Gehrke with his daughter, Megan, on the family ranch.

were significant cost-share funds available for riparian restoration projects.

When his parents died, the ranch manager was grazing Black Angus cattle on the property. Gehrke wanted to continue cattle grazing on the property, but he wondered if it would be possible to fence off the creek without reducing the grazing income from the land. His caretaker thought that was a great idea.

"I was pretty ambivalent about continuing to graze the property initially," Gehrke says, "But then I thought about it, and I've seen a lot of places on public lands where I don't want to see cattle grazing, but I like a good burger just as much as the next guy, so from a philosophical perspective, I decided that it would be a good thing to keep the cows grazing on the private land on our ranch."

And so, they decided to keep the ranch. With three-quarters of the project cost

covered through cost-share funds, his family could afford to fence-off Lawyers Creek without breaking the bank. Those improvements would benefit wildlife and water quality. Lawyers Creek is on the 303(d) list of degraded waters in Idaho.

Local farm conservation experts explained that the fencing could break the home ranch property into at least two pastures, if not more. The Gehrkes own another 80 acres on Cottonwood Butte that could be used as another cattle pasture. That would be beneficial for the private rangelands on the ranch to install a rest-rotation grazing system. "We've got a grazing system now," Gehrke says. "There's a water trough in both pastures."

Gehrke treated both sides of Lawyers Creek with 3,750 linear feet of fencing on each side. The buffer area he created for wildlife

GEHRKE *Cont. from Pg. 1*

is about 35-70 feet wide on both sides of the creek, about twice as wide as typical projects in the area.

"We've already done several tours of his place," said Eileen Rowan, Water Quality Resource Conservationist for the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission. "We like to show his place because Craig is very wildlife-oriented."

Gehrke tapped the expertise of long-time friend Mary Dudley, who has headed up Idaho Fish and Game's volunteer planting program for decades, to assist with the big job of planting more than 350 plants in the riparian areas. Dudley said she'd be glad to help, and she lined up 17 volunteers to help do the planting project two years in a row. The Gehrke family participated as well. The planting crew camped at the Gehrke place.

The plantings included willows, aspen trees, dogwoods, alders and more.

"We're in a pretty remote location," Gehrke says. "It's the end of the school bus route, the end of the powerline. We've never had 17 people at the ranch at one time. That was pretty neat."



Plantings in riparian areas of the Gehrke property.



The completed fence on the Gehrke property.

As is often the case with voluntary stewardship projects in Idaho, the Gehrke riparian enhancement project involved multiple partners and agencies, including the Conservation Commission, the Idaho County Soil and Water Conservation District, Idaho Fish and Game, the Governor's Office of Species Conservation, and NRCS.

Gehrke's project fit well with conservation district priorities in Lewis and Idaho counties - the entire Lawyers Creek watershed is a priority: more than \$700,000 has been invested in water quality-improvement projects in Lewis and Idaho counties, Rowan said.

Gehrke sees the project as giving back to the land where he grew up. He's a graduate of Highland High School nearby. "I'm into it for the wildlife," he says. "Think how beautiful the stream will be with dogwoods, aspens, cottonwoods 15 years from now. It's going to be incredible."

Gehrke already is seeing results-- he's seen herons and geese in the freshly planted riparian areas, more songbirds, deer and more.

"I feel I owe something back to the home place," he says. "It feels good to give something back. It's kind of like the wilderness concept, showing respect for the land."

For someone who has toiled for decades as a professional to see results in public land conservation, it was gratifying for Gehrke to work on a private land conservation project that moved ahead much faster. Even so, however, a required archaeological survey took a little longer than expected, and Gehrke was tearing his hair out when the fence wasn't getting built as the date approached for Dudley and the planting crew to show up. "That was driving me crazy, but it all worked out."

Plus, seeing the success of riparian-restoration projects on public lands gave him confidence that it would be a sound investment on the Gehrke ranch. "We've all seen many of those projects on public lands," he says. "This project is just like that, but on a smaller scale." □

Steve Stuebner is a professional writer who specializes in conservation success stories.

EXPLORING COMMON CHALLENGES: IDAHO AND OREGON COMMISSIONS HOLD JOINT MEETING

Idaho SWCC staff and commissioners were invited to Baker City, Oregon in July to join the Oregon Soil and Water Conservation Commission for a tour and joint commission meeting. Baker County conservation districts hosted a daylong tour of several Oregon conservation projects—from dredge tailings reclamation to Juniper removal. The tour provided an opportunity to identify shared conservation issues, build relationships, and share information.

DREDGE TAILINGS RECLAMATION

The tour kicked off with a dredge tailings restoration project that gave tour members a glimpse of the rich history of the Sumpter Valley.

Beginning in 1913, and for the following 43 years, gold dredges in Baker County turned over countless acres of land in their hunt for gold. The dredges dug approximately 20 feet below the ground surface to extract gold, flushing precious topsoil downstream in the process. While \$10 million worth

of gold was recovered, 2,500 acres of land was impacted in the process.

Post-gold rush, the dredge tailings were overrun with noxious weed species, choking out other vegetation. Baker County took over ownership from the mining company; however owners of the Defrees Ranch recognized an opportunity to work with the County to reclaim the tailing piles using cattle, creating additional land for winter feeding and summer grazing while also combatting the noxious weed problem. The outcome was a lease agreement between the County and the Defrees Ranch on a 10.6 acre plot in 1998.

After initially leveling some areas of the

tailings, fencing, and seeding the land, the Defrees family fed their cattle there during the winter months, and employed controlled grazing during summer months.

As they continued these efforts over a three-year period on the ten-acre plot, they noticed that the repetitive cattle hoof action, defecation, urination, plantings, and vegetative consumption led to a significant increase in organic matter and healthy vegetation, as well as benefits the overall aesthetics of the property. On the basis of these results, they expanded their efforts to an additional 40-acre plot ten years later, located to the northwest of the original ten-acre plot.

Over time, encouraging results continued to mount: bare ground decreased by 73%, biomass increased over 300%, and soil



Oregon's Dean Defrees (left), of the Defrees Ranch, visits with Commissioner Jerry Trebesch (right) during the tour.

analyses demonstrated that phosphorus, potassium, nitrate, ammonium, and sulfur levels all improved – taking the tailing piles from nearly sterile to a healthier, more productive environment.

Three generations of the Defrees family have been involved in the dredge tailings reclamation projects, restoring and repurposing weed-infested mine tailings.

THE JUNIPER EPIDEMIC

Another conservation project took tour members to a Juniper Slashbuster Cut in Burnt River. In Eastern Oregon, as well as in South Idaho, Juniper trees are taking over much of the landscape, competing with native vegetation, impacting wildlife habitat, and providing fuel for wildfires. Consequently, Baker County conservation

LOW INTEREST LOANS IDAHO CONSERVATION COMMISSION

Sprinkler Irrigation
No-Till Drills
Livestock Feeding Operations
Fences
Solar Stock Water Pump Systems

2.5% - 3.5% INTEREST
TERMS 7 TO 15 YEARS
LOANS UP TO \$200,000



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BAKER CITY TOUR *Cont. from Pg. 3*

districts have launched a significant campaign to restore native habitat by removing Juniper, as have districts in Idaho.

They utilize a Slashbuster - a vertically-mounted rotating head attached to a piece of heavy equipment, such as an excavator - to shred the Juniper trees and scatter the debris. Once debris is scattered, it decomposes more efficiently.

Juniper removal is an issue that crosses state lines, further demonstrating the power of information-sharing and the ongoing collaboration that is necessary to any joint conservation effort.

WATER QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

As the tour continued, it highlighted a variety of efforts that benefited water quality and improved fish habitat, including a fish passage project in the McEwen Valley, a push-up dam removal in North Powder, riparian restoration on Rock Creek, and a water quality enhancement project that installed 9,150 feet of mainline on the Powder River.

Overall, the tour showcased the great work that the state of Oregon is doing to address a variety of conservation issues in innovative ways. Their efforts are evidence of their high level of commitment to stewarding Oregon's precious natural resources.

JOINT COMMISSION MEETING

Commissioners from Oregon and Idaho stated that the joint meeting lays the groundwork for future collaboration on issues and challenges that cross state lines. Idaho will host the next joint meeting in July 2015. In the meantime, staff will explore potential joint projects and opportunities.



Tour members observe an area that had recently undergone a Juniper slash treatment.



Tour members examine the McEwen Valley Fish Passage project.

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Conservation the Idaho Way: Sowing Seeds of Stewardship