

WHISKEY CREEK RUNS THROUGH, NOT UNDER IT

Daylighting Whiskey Creek, a water-quality improvement project, underscores the importance of partnerships in voluntary conservation work. What was accomplished there is one of the many exemplary projects undertaken on private lands by Commission staff and our Idaho conservation partners this year.

As the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission continues to celebrate its 75th year, this issue of Conservation the Idaho Way focuses on the Whiskey Creek voluntary conservation success story, plus we'll detail some key accomplishments in 2014 and look ahead to 2015.

In the field of voluntary conservation, partnerships are crucial, and the Whiskey Creek water-quality project is a classic example of a successful partnership project involving more partners than you can articulate in a single breath, maybe two.

The Whiskey Creek project involved property owner, Max Nichols, the Caribou Soil Conservation District, the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission, the Idaho Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, North Gem



Left to Right: Chris Banks, Pauline Bassett, and Allan Johnson on Whiskey Creek.

High School, PacifiCorp's Environmental Coordination Committee, Trout Unlimited and more.

"It was a great team effort," says Nichols, the owner of the 140-acre farm who made it all possible. "It has been a real pleasure working with Chris Banks, Allan Johnson, and Pauline Bassett. This project took a lot of time, planning and organization. And capping it all off, it was so nice to have the high school students come over and lay 20,000 square feet of sod and plant all of those willows and dogwoods. They worked hard from the time they got off the bus to the end of the day."

The 65 girls and boys from North Gem in Bancroft, Idaho, were famished after their work day -- they consumed 28 pizzas. "Some of them were big husky boys who could have eaten a whole pizza by themselves," laughed Pauline Bassett,

district administrator for the Caribou Soil and Water Conservation District, who lined up the high school kids to help out.

WHISKEY CREEK - HOW IT GOT STARTED

About six years ago, Chris Banks, a water quality resource conservationist for IASCD in Soda Springs, and Allan Johnson, staff engineer for the Conservation Commission, visited Nichols' farm on the Niter Bench, south of Grace. Some 50-60 years before, a large free-stall dairy barn and concrete corral had been built directly over the top of Whiskey Creek. And the creek had been placed in a leaky culvert for drainage considerations.

Cow manure from the barn and corral had been contaminating the water source on an ongoing basis for years, so Banks and Johnson wanted to come up with a solution. "It wasn't a suitable place to



An old dairy barn was built over the top of Whiskey Creek; the creek itself was placed in a culvert below grade.

WHISKEY CREEK *Cont. from Pg. 1*



North Gem High School students help lay sod to hold the hillside in place for the winter.

house animals,” Johnson notes. Nichols wondered what it might cost to remove the barn and corral to daylight Whiskey Creek and restore the stream course to a natural state.

“He wanted it to be a place where they could enjoy the beauty of the land and the creek,” Johnson says. “He wanted to restore it to something that’s beautiful and useful and get rid of the eyesore.”

Whiskey Creek is on the state’s 303(d) list of degraded waters, so Banks figured it would score high on the priority list as a 319 water quality grant application. He and Johnson worked on the project estimate. Banks put together an application for an \$80,000 grant, and he recruited project partners to help with matching and in-kind contributions. Nichols, PacifiCorp’s Environmental Coordination Committee, North Gem High School and the Caribou district all stepped up to provide matching funds and in-kind contributions.

The grant funds came through in 2011. Then Johnson drafted an engineering plan for daylighting the creek and creating a new stream course that would work on a steep slope. “It’s a small amount of space on a fragile slope,” Johnson explains. “One thing we were really worried about is when we daylighted the stream, we didn’t want it to wash away the hillside.”

Johnson came up with a 320-foot meandering stream course design that would bring the creek down the hill at a reasonable grade.

In the meantime, Nichols went to work removing the barn and corral. He had some experts look at the barn and recommended that he salvage the concrete blocks and lumber. He donated the lumber to the Salt Lake City Boys & Girls Club, and they built a new building with it. “There were a lot of people who benefited from the project, more than you’d expect,” Johnson says.

Phillips Backhoe Service in Grace received the contract to build the stream course, following Johnson’s engineering drawings. They flagged the route on the hillside, and built the new stream over the last year and a half. “It’s the first time I’ve designed a creek from scratch,” Johnson says. “I tried to put in meanders, pools and flood plain features so it will slow down the water velocity as the water moves downhill.”

The students finished off the project by installing sod and willow plantings to lessen the possibility of stream bank failure and erosion this winter. Fish already are moving into the creek.

“I’m extremely pleased with it-- I’d rate it a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10”, said Bassett, who has logged 34 years on the job. “It’s amazing how that site has been transformed

in the last year. It’s taken on a whole new look. Plus, just in the last three weeks, it’s remarkable to see all of the aquatic life in the creek.”

“There’s a million-dollar view from the top of that hill,” adds Nichols. “The project has turned out really nicely.”

The Caribou district plans to host field tours of the Whiskey Creek project next spring, and they plan to invite Idaho legislators and Caribou County commissioners to visit. “This project never would have happened without all of our partnerships,” Bassett says. □



Max Nichols, the property owner, had the barn taken down slowly and carefully so he could donate building materials to charity. The wood from the barn was donated to a boys and girls club in Salt Lake City for the construction of a new building.

OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND CELEBRATION: 2014 WAS A VERY GOOD YEAR

The Conservation Commission's FY 2014 Performance Measurements Report shows an up-tick of interest in voluntary conservation - in both funding and the number of projects we've taken on with our conservation partners. While some of the accomplishments may seem modest, they were accomplished with a skeleton field staff of 11! Commission employees - from water resource quality conservationists to administrative support staff to engineers-- are an unusually motivated and dedicated group of people. We couldn't do it without them!

Here are some of the highlights from the Commission's FY 2014 Performance Measurements Report.

IDAHO CONSERVATION DISTRICTS (*the Commission provides technical assistance and financial support to 50 locally led conservation districts*)

Districts received Trustee and Benefit funds that included the usual base funding amount (\$8,500), local matching funds (capped at \$50,000 per district), \$1,000 each in operating funds, and modest capacity building grants. In addition, prudent management allowed us to roll down a modest operating surplus to districts (an extra \$320 each) at the end of FY 2014.

After a first-year shake-down cruise in FY 2013 and subsequent changes to increase flexibility and staff discretionary hours, in June 2014 we wrapped up our second year of a new process for allocating technical assistance to districts. So-doing has allowed us to better-manage personnel, resources, and has actually resulted more on-the-ground conservation and allowed us to serve more districts. We increased:

- Our number of new projects. From 42 in FY 2011 to 57 in FY 2014, and from



Idaho Soil & Water Conservation Commission staff engineer Allan Johnson on Whiskey Creek, his signature and all-time-favorite project.

42 ongoing projects in FY 2011 to 57 in FY 2014.

- We assisted 386 landowners, and
- The number of districts served. From 31 in FY 2011 to 38 last year.

LOW-INTEREST CONSERVATION LOANS

Our Resource Conservation and Rangeland Development Loan Program has been marketing low interest conservation loans at numerous association annual meetings including Farm Bureau, Idaho Cattle Association, irrigation trade shows, etc., and has advertised in Capitol Press and other industry publications.

After several sluggish years with low borrower response, our marketing efforts have allowed loan volume to increase significantly in FY 2014: from 4 loans approved in FY 2013 at a total loaned of \$128,100 to 12 loans approved in FY 2014 at a total loaned of \$841,624.

WATER CONSERVATION EFFORTS

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) efforts led to the inking of 156 new CREP contracts with landowners in the Eastern Snake River Plain Aquifer to reduce water consumption on marginal farm

ground, impacting 16,792 acres. A total of 28 existing contracts were "certified" established (met program goals) on 2,537 acres.

WATER QUALITY EFFORTS

We finalized 6 Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) Implementation Plans, and worked on 15 in progress. We've all but eliminated the backlog of overdue plans, but an additional nineteen recently assigned plans are now pending! We anticipate completing our 200th TMDL Plan soon.

Our groundwater program treated almost 28,000 acres in Nitrate Priority Areas, reducing 142,000#s of nitrates, more than 32,000#s of phosphates, and close to 55,000 tons of sediment from Idaho waterways.

OUTREACH

We celebrated our 75th Anniversary by a holding a commemorative ceremony in the State Capitol. We were joined by speakers including Dustin Miller of the Office of Species Conservation, Virgil Moore of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Barry Burnell of the Department of Environmental Quality, and many others. Longtime voluntary conservation legislative champions Senators Bert Brackett, Jim Patrick, and

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COMMISSION 2014 *Cont. from Pg. 3*

Steve Bair were joined by Representatives Neil Anderson, Steve Miller, and former Representative Ken Roberts in receiving the Commission's Arthur Snow Award (named after the Latah County legislator who spearheaded the effort to found the Conservation Commission and local conservation districts in 1939).

Newsletter Since beginning to publish our newsletter in July 2013, we've featured success stories and mentions of Owyhee, East Cassia, Nez Perce, Kootenai-Shoshone, Oneida, Franklin, Lewis, Latah, Twin Falls, Clark, East Side, West Side, Madison, Bruneau, Butte, Custer, Bear Lake, Clearwater, Idaho, Weiser River, Adams, Gooding, Ada, Canyon, Caribou, and other districts.

We are fortunate to have conservation journalist Steve Stuebner on board to tell our stories (he also writes for Life on the Range). His great content has led to an ongoing opportunity to provide content for the Idaho Farm Bureau magazine, increasing our exposure by the thousands. Our newsletter's current circulation is over 500.

Social media efforts increased significantly - our posts on Facebook totaled 220- and we tweeted 89 times on Twitter.

We just completed our 4th annual **Listening Session** at the annual Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Agencies (IASCD). It was a great opportunity to piggyback on IASCD's annual conference, reaching more district supervisors in one fell swoop than would otherwise be possible!

NEW FIELD STAFF

The Commission is pleased to welcome George Hitz, who will be working as a field staff in the Blackfoot NRCS Field Office,

serving conservation districts in Division V. George reported for work on Monday, December 1st.

He's no stranger to conservation districts, having worked for six years as an Agricultural and Natural Resources Specialist for the Fairbanks, Alaska Soil and Water Conservation District. Prior to his Alaskan experience, George worked for NRCS as a soil scientist in Lyman, Wyoming. He graduated from Oregon State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture.

We are excited to have George join our conservation team!

WHAT'S NEXT?

Partners are invited to join our Board and staff for a **Strategic Planning Brainstorming Session** Dec. 10 in Boise, to be facilitated by Ray Ledgerwood. It will be held from 8:00-4:30 pm MT at the Marriott Springhill Suites in Boise. Teleconferencing will be available. Please call the Boise office to get the teleconference number, RSVP, and/or order a lunch (208-258-4752) if you'll be there in person.

Updating **Idaho's Ag Pollution Abatement Plan** - Districts have joined 18 other stakeholders (associations like Food Producers, Water Users, Idaho Cattle, and Idaho Farm Bureau, are at the table with us and our sister agencies including IDWR and DEQ). The Ag Pollution Abatement Plan is a road map for implementation activities under Idaho's Nonpoint Source Management Plan and the federal Clean Water Act.

Our FY 2016 Budget Request was submitted on Sept. 1st to the Governor's Division of Financial Management (DFM) and Legis-

lative Services Office (LSO). We've requested essentially the same budget as last year (adjusted for cost increases and replacement of field equipment) with minor differences, including:

- \$50,000 in additional Trustee and Benefit funding to be distributed directly to districts equally outside of the match formula process. If appropriated, that will amount to an extra \$150,000 going to districts over the last three years.

SO LONG PARTNERS Finally, we're sorry to be saying farewell to four key NRCS partners in 2015: Jeff Burwell, Eugene Schock, Bob Tribbelhorn, and Hal Swenson.

Each of these dedicated men has been a true asset to voluntary conservation in Idaho and to the Commission. We'll miss them greatly. ☐



Retiring state conservationist, Jeff Burwell, and retired district administrator Sherry Klaus, at a Division I meeting.

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