

HE'S ALL IN FOR VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION

North Idaho farmer provides leadership on wetland-enhancement project, stream-stabilization on Coeur d'Alene River

By Steve Stuebner

Mike Schlepp is a conservation-oriented farmer in the Coeur d'Alene River Basin who likes to make things better-- not only on his farm but also on the Coeur d'Alene River and in the Coeur d'Alene watershed.

He grew up with grit in his teeth on a farm in Eastern Montana. He gained his conservation ethic from his dad, who lived through the Dust Bowl era. Farming in Montana, the young Schlepp saw the importance of conserving a thin layer of topsoil in an area prone to heavy wind erosion. "I grew up observing terrible wind erosion," he says. "I watched it pile up in some instances where it covered the top of a fence post."

Recently, Schlepp and the six other supervisors on the Kootenai-Shoshone Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) worked on a partnership project with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) to shore up the banks of the Coeur d'Alene River for 4,000 linear feet in an IDFG wildlife management area. The project cost was about \$217,000, with a water-quality grant from the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ), funds from Avista Corp., the local utility, and in-kind contributions from IDFG.

The bank-stabilization project was needed because the wave-action of boat wakes causes soil to wash into the Coeur d'Alene River and Coeur d'Alene Lake. Eroding stream banks are always a problem that needs to be addressed, but in the Coeur d'Alene basin, there's a worrisome element that makes the problem a much higher priority than normal. The basin is situated in the middle of a Superfund toxic waste



Pictured left to right: Mike Schlepp, Mark Hogen, and Fran Hughes, Chair of the Kootenai-Shoshone SWCD, on the Coeur d'Alene River, checking out the streambank stabilization project.

site. The soils along the river are heavily contaminated with toxic metals such as lead, cadmium, arsenic and zinc, from a century of mining pollution that washed downstream from the Bunker Hill mines.

"The Idaho Fish and Game property was bleeding contaminated sediment into the Coeur d'Alene River, and the currents spread that into Coeur d'Alene Lake," noted Schlepp. "The problem is so obvious to people interested in conservation and erosion. Everyone knew there was a huge problem, and the big conundrum was how to fix it."

Fortunately, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) had developed a bank-stabilization technique on the St. Joe River in the late 1990s that had stood the test of time. Schlepp used the same technique to treat 2,000 feet of river bank on his property in 2002, as the

first demonstration project on the Coeur d'Alene River. Former U.S. Sen. Larry Craig obtained funds from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to conduct the pilot project.

The technique uses small rock-- 3/4-inch-minus gravel-- placed on the eroding stream bank with heavy equipment, and then a second layer of 8-inch-diameter rock or smaller to stabilize the bank. The rock is applied several feet below the high-water mark, and several feet above. Projects can be further enhanced with riparian plants to naturally anchor the banks.

The key to the technique is to avoid disturbing the soil as the rock is being applied. A track hoe operator installs and compacts the rock either from the shore or from a barge. "Because of the

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contaminated soil, there are lots of concerns about liability,” Schlepp notes.

The Kootenai-Shoshone SWCD agreed to administer the project on Schlepp’s farm, and then they held a number of tours to show how the technique works. “It proved so successful that other landowners asked for assistance,” he said. Landowners had more trust in the District. “People didn’t want anything to do with the government. That’s how it got started, and that got the ball rolling.”

“Now you have miles and miles of riverbank treated with this design,” Schlepp continues. “And it’s withstood several flood events.”

“The Medimont project turned out very nice,” says Miles Benker, Wildlife Biologist for IDFG in Coeur d’Alene. “That was the first major reach of the Department’s wildlife management areas that we’ve done so far. We own over 25 miles of river bank along the river, so there is a lot of stream bank yet to be treated.”

IDFG planted more than 6,000 willows as part of the stream bank restoration project



Before stream bank stabilization work.



After stream bank stabilization work.

and more than 400 riparian shrubs and trees, Benker said. “That was our in-kind contribution.”

Bob Flagor, District Administrator, said he expects to see more bank stabilization projects to occur in the future. It’s not difficult to persuade the Kootenai-Shoshone District Board of Supervisors to help out, he says. “Coeur d’Alene Lake is the crown jewel, but it’s really about more than that ... we’re interested in forests and farm lands, too ... really the whole watershed.”

This spring, Schlepp saw the fruits of another project come to reality in a big way on his farm. In early March, he asked a hunter to help him put out 32 swan decoys next to a 400-acre wetland on his farm on the Coeur d’Alene River. In 2007, Schlepp inked an \$875,000 conservation easement with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to set aside the wetland for waterfowl habitat. Three-hundred acres of the wetland had very low levels of heavy metals compared to sites nearby-- 397 parts per million, compared to some that measure in the thousands.

“It was already clean and ready to go,” Schlepp points out.

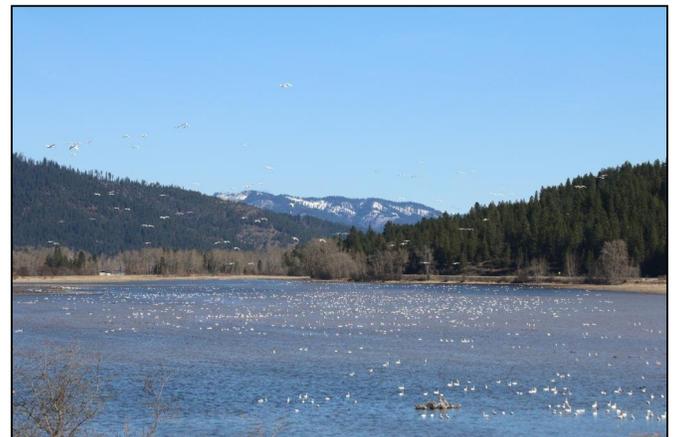
The EPA worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Ducks Unlimited to restore another 100 acres of Schlepp’s wetland that had 1,700 ppm in heavy metals. But for several years, the swans didn’t come back. In March, with the aid of the decoys, however, the

birds started to return. First about 50 birds landed in the wetlands, and then, by the next day, they started to come in by the thousands. Officials counted 3,200 birds on the Schlepp wetland in mid-March. The previous high count was 221.

“When you see over 3,000 swans fly into our farm, it’s a wonderful feeling,” Schlepp says. “It’s great to know that we have helped the wildlife have a safe trip through this basin. I’ve had to watch too many swans die from lead poisoning, and it’s a gruesome sight.”

Now, the swans have a safe place to stop on their spring migration to the north. And other waterfowl are using the wetlands as well. “We have all manner of ducks and lots of geese, a lot of shore birds, and moose using the wetland,” he says. “It’s fun to watch.”

Schlepp and his wife, Brenda, still farm the rest of their property, raising red top grass for seed, Angus cattle and hay. And Schlepp spends plenty of time serving on the Kootenai-Shoshone SWCD Board of Supervisors, trying to make things better.



Swans on the Coeur d’Alene River, near Mike Schelpp’s property. Photo Credit: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

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SCHLEPP *Cont. from Pg. 2*

"Mike's always been into conservation, going back to his days in Montana," says Flagor. "He's been on the Board for more than 30 years because frankly he likes working on this kind of stuff."

Schlepp traces his conservation ethic back to the days growing up on the Montana farm. "My father was very conservation-minded in the 1960s," he says.

As a 10-year-old, Schlepp drove a plow and tilled land that had been placed in the "Land Bank," a precursor to the national Conservation Reserve Program. The wind blew hard in that area, and the topsoil was shallow, only about 6 inches deep. So to manage wind erosion, they tilled the land

into 165-foot-wide strips, with 165 feet of space in between the strips. They also used gully plugs to capture sediment from fields.

Their neighboring farmer in Montana didn't install conservation practices, and Schlepp saw the topsoil from the adjoining farm get blown away, either to their property or elsewhere. "My father understood the need to practice conservation to save that precious topsoil. That was the start of my conservation ethic."

Schlepp's father established their family farm on the banks of the Coeur d'Alene River in 1979. As he grew toward

retirement, he asked Mike if he'd be willing to come home to run the farm. He was working construction at the time in another state. He returned in 1981, and he plans on retiring on the banks of the Coeur d'Alene River, a place that he's been steadily improving for more than 30 years.

"It's been fun, it really has," Schlepp says. "Hopefully this is just the beginning of creating a safe environment for fish and wildlife in the Coeur d'Alene Basin." □

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



Commissioner Profile

JERRY TREBESCH

Board Secretary

Where do you live? What did you do in your civilian life? I live in Southwest Boise. I spent my entire working career in banking, the majority of my career with Idaho First National Bank (West One). I have worked in Rigby, Salmon, St. Maries, and Soda Springs. I moved to Boise in 1983 and was in charge of all agriculture lending for the bank for 10 years. I finished my career with West One in Caldwell. After Caldwell, I worked for Washington Mutual and D.L. Evans Bank.

How long have you served on the Conservation Commission? I was appointed to the Commission in the summer of 2011.

What do you like about serving on the Conservation Commission? I really enjoy the folks I work with, as well as learning the ins and outs of what we really do to serve the agricultural community of Idaho.

What are your passions in life? I enjoy my family. I also have a cattle business. My hobbies are physical fitness, skiing, and vegetable gardening.

What is your favorite thing about Idaho? Since I was raised in Montana, Idaho is not a whole lot different-- lots of recreation. I enjoy the crop and livestock diversity in Idaho.

Tell us about your family. I have been married to Arlene for 51 years. We knew each other a little bit in high school but starting dating at Montana State. We have four children and four grandchildren.

If money were no object, what would you do to improve the farms, ranches, or natural resources in Idaho? If money were no object I would improve every farm and ranch in Idaho if the owners so desired. I would accomplish this by giving grants and loans, or a combination of the two.

What is your vision for the future of Idaho agriculture? Idaho agriculture has a bright future because of its diversity. Additionally, there are some great young and intelligent farmers that are willing to improve the farms and ranches of Idaho. □

VIRTUAL TOUR HIGHLIGHTS DIVISION II AFO IMPLEMENTATION PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Division II of the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts (IASCD) held a virtual tour event on Tuesday, June 24, 2014 at the Red Lion Inn in Lewiston. The tour highlighted their 11-year North Idaho Animal Feed Operations (AFO) Implementation Project. The project was a collaborative effort, sponsored jointly by the Clearwater, Idaho, Latah, Lewis, and Nez Perce Conservation Districts.

The project began in 2001, and its aim was to partner with livestock producers to improve water quality issues related to live-



Before: In 2002, an AFO had direct access to a nearby creek.



After: In 2011, the same area after a buffer strip had been installed between the creek and the AFO.

stock operations in the five-county region of North-Central Idaho. The project's core objective was to voluntarily apply Best Management practices (BMPs) to various cattle feeding operations to decrease sediment, bacteria, organics, and nutrient loading to streams in the project area.

Treatments included waste containment, development of offsite watering facilities, and relocation of confinement areas. The project was comprised of four phases, which spanned over ten years, and funded 60 individual AFOs. Overall, 8,665 head of cattle were impacted, 3,598 acres, and 151,532 (28.7 miles) linear feet of riparian treated.

The Virtual Tour recognized the many conservation partners who contributed funds to the project, including the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission (ISWCC), and Bonneville Power Administration; with primary funding coming from private landowners. In addition, the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), ISWCC, and the Clearwater, Idaho, Latah, Lewis, and Nez Perce Conservation Districts provided technical assistance.

Bill Lillibridge, ISWCC State Engineer, and Eileen Rowan, Water Quality Resource Conservationist, were recognized at the event for their substantial technical assistance contributions. Eileen attributed the project's success to the conservation partnership, "This project represents a united effort between various conservation agencies and local producers. Together we made a substantial improvement to water quality and producer operations in Idaho." □

WEISER RIVER SCD HOLDS TOUR

The Weiser River Soil Conservation District held its annual tour and lunch on Tuesday, June 10, 2014. The tour showcased one of four automated and solar-powered head gates that the District installed this year.

The tour also included the Payette Ditch Wetland, installed by the District in recent years, which has seen significant success with vegetative growth and load reduction numbers. Suspended Sediment Concentration has been reduced by 570 tons annually, and Phosphorus by 1.045 tons annually.

For further information regarding Weiser SCD, contact Vicki Lukehart at (208) 549-2628 x112.



A fully-installed automated head gate (shown from the back side) at Jenkins Creek.

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