

MARSING YOUNG GUN THE FUTURE OF CONSERVATION THE IDAHO WAY

By Steve Stuebner

Jason Miller grew up on a farm in Marsing, helping his family raise hay, corn and wheat and tend to their cattle on private lands and federal grazing allotments in the Owyhee Mountains. He graduated from Marsing High School, excelled on the rodeo team and earned a degree in animal science from the University of Idaho.

Since joining the Conservation Commission as a water quality resource conservationist several years ago, he's evolved into a bonafide young gun - a quick study, adept at learning the tricks of the trade and picking up the torch carried by his mentors, baby boomers who have been at it for a long time.

"Jason-- and others like him-- represent the future of ag conservation in Idaho. If he's any indication, our future's looking pretty good," says Norman Wright, chairman of the Conservation Commission.

In the business of agricultural conservation, it helps to come from an ag background. Miller discovered that quickly when meeting with landowners about water-quality issues on local streams. "The hardest part is the first impression," he says. "You want to put the landowner at ease."

Miller's ag background helps "break the ice" with property owners. He's now in his third year working on water quality issues for the Conservation Commission. When he meets with a new property owner, he thinks about his own experience on the farm. "I can relate to a lot of the issues they're going through," he says.



Jason Miller on his family ranch in Marsing.

One of Miller's real assets is the ability to sit back and learn from property owners, says Mike Somerville, vice chair of the Canyon Soil Conservation District. "One of the key things that makes Jason so successful is that he has learned how to listen," Somerville says. "He's gained so much knowledge because he's listened to a lot of older farm-

ers and ranchers about conservation. But he also knows when to suggest the right kinds of conservation measures to a landowner. You can turn people off if you don't bring it up at the right time."



Jason Miller sets water on his cover crop.

"Agriculture runs deep in my blood," Miller says. "My favorite part of Idaho is all of our great farmland, rangelands and natural resources that make it all possible. It's great to be able to work in this job to try to make things better in terms of conserving our natural resources and raise my son in the same rural environment that I grew up in ."

JASON MILLER *Cont. from Pg. 1*

Somerville would know, having served for many years on the Canyon district board. Sometimes, professional ag conservation staff people can turn off farmers and ranchers because they overwhelm them with information, he says. "You have to wait for them to ask questions, and that's the time to provide some answers. Somehow Jason learned that at a really young age. He's going to be a great conservationist."

As a young man working on the front lines of voluntary ag conservation, you might say that Miller represents the future of Conservation the Idaho Way. In many ways, he epitomizes the professional people who have worked on ag conservation in Idaho for decades. It's always easier to convince farmers and ranchers to get engaged in conservation work by people who have similar backgrounds and have walked a mile in their shoes.

"When I go visit with a farmer or rancher, it always reminds me of my own farm and ranch," Miller says. "I've met a lot of great people and I've learned a lot from them, and it's nice to offer some insight into someone else's operation, too."

"It's great to have some younger people like Jason involved in professional conservation work," adds Delwyne Trefz, district support services specialist with the Conservation Commission. "If you look around, a lot of us in this line of work are getting up in the years. We're a little old and musty. It's nice to have a chance to get some fresh blood in there."

Miller's job is to craft water-quality project implementation plans in cooperation with landowners to reduce sediment, nitrogen and phosphorous in streams, enhance streambank vegetation and install other conservation measures. The goal is to improve water quality in streams that are on the state list of degraded waters, known as the 303(d) list.

The first step is for Miller to make contact with property owners to see if they'd like to participate in water-quality improvement plans. After an invitation letter goes out, typically about 30 percent of the landowners will engage in the process, Miller says. That's when he goes out to visit with prop-



Jason Miller points out a turnip in a cover crop mix.

erty owners to learn about their operations and talk about water quality issues. "Some people are very conservation-minded and want to improve their operations," he says.

"Then we'll go out and do our data collection," he says. "We invite the landowners to come along with us because they know more about the land than anyone else. We look at what's going on in the stream and on the uplands to see what might be affecting water quality."

Miller also talks about the state and federal programs available to landowners to make conservation improvements on their property -- programs like the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and the Conservation Commission's low-interest loan program. He makes it clear that participating in the programs is voluntary and confidential.

"If they want to look at converting from flood irrigation to sprinkler irrigation, that's been pretty popular with landowners because they usually can increase their yields and cover their expenses," he says.

If any of the conservation programs are appealing to landowners, the first requirement is to craft a conservation plan for their farm or ranch. Once a conservation plan

has been completed, they will be eligible to qualify for state and federal assistance.

Working on water-quality implementation plans takes at least one full field season to get out to visit with property owners, craft a series of best management practices and other conservation practices for landowners in the watershed, and then begin plan implementation.

Miller has worked on a number of water quality plans in the last several years, including a plan for the Jordan Creek watershed in Owyhee County, and the Middle Snake-Succor Creek area.

His favorite project, so far, has been the Cold Springs Riparian Restoration Project in Elmore County. "I really enjoyed working on this project because it reminds me of our family ranch and felt good to work with landowners that are conservation-minded," Miller says.

Crafting water-quality improvement plans is quite involved with many moving parts, he says. "I like it-- it's neat in a lot of different ways," he says. "It's really interesting to learn about what goes into creating a set of best management practices for a property owner. It's a lot more complex than one might think."

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JASON MILLER *Cont. from Pg. 2*

Miller expected to work on his family farm after graduating from U-Idaho. But a part-time water-quality job with the Owyhee Soil and Water Conservation District got him interested in professional ag conservation work. When a full-time position came open with the Conservation Commission, Miller applied for the job. It was particularly attractive because it combined his interests in the environment and agriculture, and because it was based in Marsing.

He likes the way of life in Marsing, and so does his wife, Tori, who also grew up on a local farm. In their spare time, the couple competes successfully in team-roping competitions in regional rodeos with their cavvy of nine horses. They are raising a son, Clancy, who is now 3 years old. They also rent local farm ground to raise crops and cattle.

Miller is finding that he can balance his full-time job with the Conservation Commission with the extra work required to run his



Jason Miller, pictured here with his wife Tori, on their family ranch.

own farm, tend to his cattle, and still have time once in a while to compete in rodeos.

"Agriculture runs deep in my blood," Miller says. "My favorite part of Idaho is all of our great farmland, rangelands and natural

resources that make it all possible. It's great to be able to work in this job to try to make things better in terms of conserving our natural resources and raise my son in the same rural environment that I grew up in."



LANDOWNER ACCOMPLISHMENTS SHOWCASED ON LITTLE WEISER RIVER TOUR

By Wendy Green

There is less sediment flowing down the Little Weiser River today and more acres of pasture and hay ground staying put, thanks to the stream bank restoration efforts of local landowners.

The Adams Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) hosted a tour of restoration sites last month to show interested landowners and state and federal agencies what has been accomplished.

"We are wrapping up the second phase of a nearly decade-long project to reduce bank loss along the Little Weiser River," explained Julie Burkhardt, Chair of the Adams SWCD. "Over the last eight years, landowners have voluntarily implemented best management practices to stop bank loss and reduce the sediment load in the Little Weiser by an estimated 1,812 tons per year so far."

To date, 19 individual projects have been completed in Phase 2, with four more

planned between now and the end of the year, when projects are scheduled to conclude. To date, Phase 2 of the project has implemented 5,089 feet of stream bank restoration projects and installed 4,229 feet of riparian fencing. The total sediment reduction should be well over 2,000 tons a year.

Funding for the project is provided by congress under Section 319 of the Clean Water Act. The 319 grant, administered by the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), covers up to sixty percent of the cost of BMPs. The landowners' share of the cost can take the form of in-kind contributions, including labor, use of personal equipment, and plant material



Julie Burkhardt, Adams SWCD chair, and Bill Lillibridge, Engineer with the Conservation Commission, with one of the many rock barbs that landowners have installed.

or large rock. In fact, the more hands-on the landowner is, the greater the non-cash or in-kind contribution.

Tour participants looked at several ways to protect their land along the river, including riparian fencing, rock barbs, and willow plantings.

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LITTLE WEISER RIVER TOUR *Cont. from Pg. 3*

Bill Lillibridge, Engineer with the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission, worked with landowners to design the best options for their particular situations. He explained how rock barbs work.

“Rock barbs with willow plantings act like speed bumps to slow the current along the stream’s edge,” said Lillibridge. “The slower water allows deposition of fine material along the bank, giving woody plants a place to establish. These woody plants, with their extensive root systems, provide the long-term protection for the banks.”

Restoring miles of riverbank requires cooperation not only among landowners and the Adams SWCD, but involves partner agencies like the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission, Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, Idaho Department of Water Resources and the US Army Corps of Engineers.

In-stream work requires permits from two of those agencies, while other partners provide engineering and technical support. Agency representatives voiced their support for the improvements they saw on the tour.

“The on-the-ground results of what you’ve been able to accomplish with the funding you’ve received were impressive,” said Dave Pisarski, 319 Program Coordinator with Idaho DEQ, “It’s always satisfying to see first-hand the outcomes we get a few years after these projects are successfully completed. In this case, you certainly did not disappoint, as the results of your efforts were readily apparent.”

Over the past six years, Royce and Pan Schwenkfelder of Cambridge have partic-

ipated in the 319 project to protect several stretches of the Little Weiser through their ranch. They have been pleased with the positive results.

“It is encouraging to see the agency folks beginning to understand that landowners do actually care about the river and the erosion that occurs every year,” said Royce Schwenkfelder. “Willingness on their part to get

landowners timely permitting, the engineering needed, and not make the process quite so painful is appreciated. Landowners are getting on board and connecting projects into something that can make a difference in the long term. I would encourage more folks to get involved and see how this process can help them.”

Recently the Adams SWCD was awarded funding for Phase 1 of the Upper Weiser Restoration project. This project will encompass the upper reaches of the Weiser River, from the Fruitvale area downstream to about Goodrich Creek near the county line.

“It may take several phases of grant funding to address all the areas of concern for landowners along this stretch of the Weiser River,” said Burkhardt. “The District will start by assisting landowners who have already



Participants gather near a project for the Little Weiser River Tour, which took place on Sept. 10.

contacted us. However, we encourage any Weiser River landowners to get in touch with us. We’ll work with landowners as we have funding and engineering available.”

Burkhardt noted that river restoration is a long-term process that won’t be accomplished in a year or two.

“In fact, the District is considering applying for Phase 3 funding for the Little Weiser,” she said. “Any landowners on the Little Weiser who are interested in future stream bank work should contact the District soon. If there is sufficient interest and need, the District could submit another grant application by next summer.”

If you are interested in learning more about stream bank restoration, contact the Adams Soil and Water Conservation District at 253-4668 or aswd@ctcweb.net. ■

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