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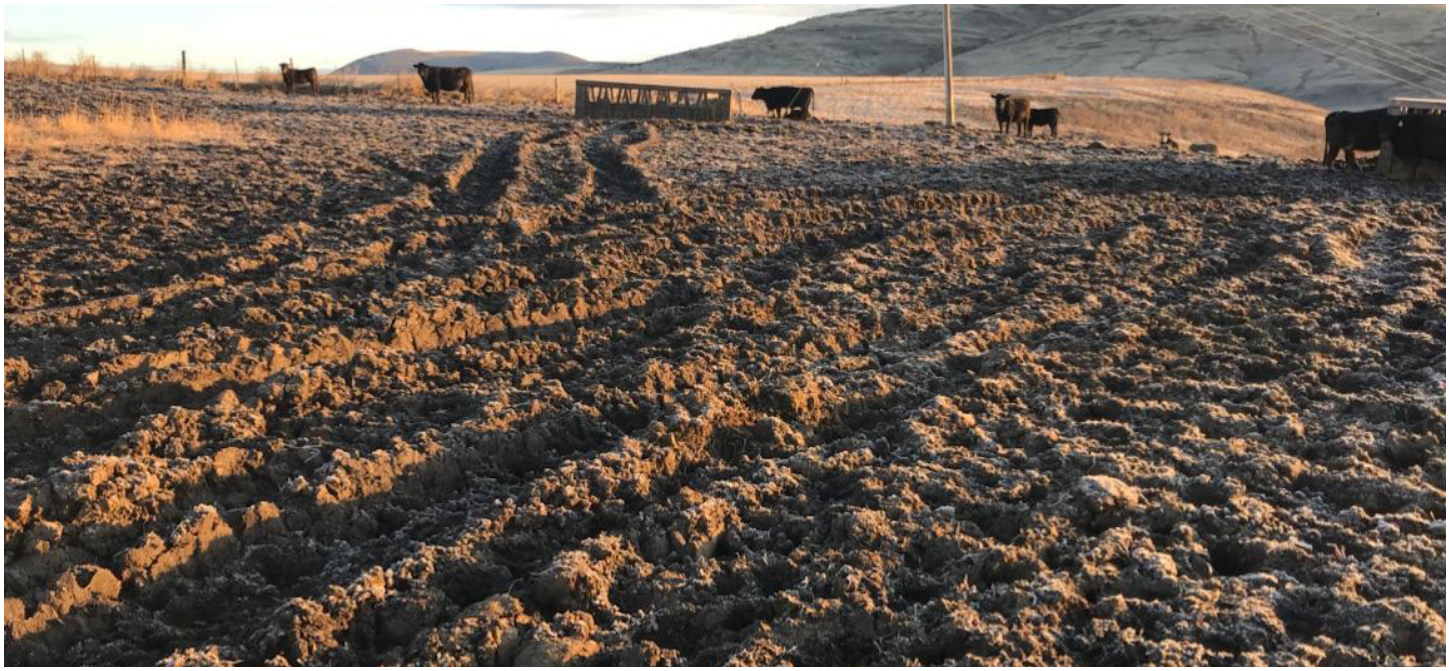

Before BMPs

PARTNERS REDUCE MUD, IMPROVE WATER QUALITY ON CAMAS PRAIRIE WATERWAYS

Over 16 Idaho County ranchers signed up to install BMPs

By Steve Stuebner

In the beautiful rolling draws and hills of North Idaho's Camas Prairie, numerous Idaho County cattle ranchers are stepping up to install a host of best management practices on cattle wintering grounds to get their livestock out of the mud and improve water quality in Red Rock Creek, Cottonwood Creek and the South Fork of the Clearwater River.

About three years ago, Eileen Rowan, a water quality specialist and conservation professional for the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission, put together a group of three landowners who wanted to make improvements on their cattle wintering groups on private lands, if Rowan could win a government grant to provide cost-share funds.

Eileen loves her job!

She landed a $128,000 state agriculture grant from Idaho DEQ in 2018, plus about $32,000 in local matching funds, to cover the needs of the trio of landowners. Once they started putting in improvements like concrete pads for manure management, graveling access roads to winter feeding grounds, developing off-stream water for cattle and riparian fencing, other landowners noticed.

Now she's got another 8 landowners signed up for a §319 grant from Idaho DEQ/EPA, with a total project cost of $420,000, including $170,000 in local matching funds. And she has more landowners waiting in the wings; a total of 16 have signed up so far. "My list is growing!" Rowan says.

"We're right along the main road, Green Creek Road, and people could see the improvements. Some of my

neighbors helped with the project, and the word got out pretty quick," said John Schumaker, an Idaho County rancher.

"It's kind of neat how the word spread," Rowan says. "You sell one person on something and then their neighbors see it, and pretty soon you've got enough people together to apply for a grant."

For Schumaker, trying to feed 60 head of Angus-cross cattle in the winter months on his private land was getting to be a real nuisance. "We've had lots of mud in the last couple of years, 1-2 feet of mud. It's been terrible."

They received the go-ahead to install the improvements in September, and Schumaker put in three cattle-feeding concrete pads in addition to graveling an access road. And he's quite happy with the results.

"I'm really glad it happened," he said.

All of the projects are located on private land. The landowners are doing them on a voluntary basis to not only improve cattle operations, but also improve water quality and add value to their ranch.

"If Eileen wasn't helping us with the government grants, we couldn't afford to do this stuff on our own," says Chris Arnzen, who runs a family farm/ranch with 400 Angus-Hereford cross cattle. "She's been really good to work with, and she's very flexible."

Culvert installed under newly improved, rocked road to cattle feeding area.

Getting ready to pour concrete pads for winter cattle feeding .

Schumaker had been talking with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) officials about funding a cost-share project with that agency, but under the NRCS rules, the cattle-feeding pads had to be enclosed with walls and a roof. That didn't make sense for his winter operation.

When he met Rowan through the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation District, he was thrilled to learn that state sources of cost-share funding were available.

"He had been trying to get a project together for NRCS for 10 years," Rowan says. "He told me it saved his operation. He was getting so sick and tired of working in the mud, he was about ready to sell the ranch. It's a pretty cool thing to hear that you've helped save his operation."

The Idaho County projects are being done in partnership with the Idaho SWCD. Eileen Sonnen, chair of the Idaho SWCD, runs the Rocky T Ranch with her family, raising 20-25 head of Hereford cattle. She has installed a number of BMPs on her winter feeding grounds, including a concrete pad for feeding cattle, graveling an access road to the cattle feeding grounds, and installing a culvert on the road to eliminate draining issues and sedimentation.

She said the project on the Schumaker Ranch inspired a lot of the interest among the local ranchers. "Once they've driven by his place, they're like, oh my god! It blossomed from there," Sonnen said.

Sonnen helped Rowan recruit more landowners, and she says there's a whole group of people who want to make improvements between the small country town of Keuterville and Cottonwood along Cottonwood Creek. "There's a whole bunch of farmers and ranchers who are interested in doing stuff. It's all going to mesh together and benefit the whole watershed."

Rowan remembers being part of a team writing the TMDL (Total Maximum Daily Load) plans for Cottonwood Creek when she first started working for the Conservation Commission in the early 2000s. Initially, she started writing grants to support no-till farming practices with wheat farmers. That effort got a fair bit of traction, but they didn't see much improvement in water quality in nearby streams.

That's when she decided to change focus to livestock operations. The need for installing concrete pads for

Pad for winter feeding.

cattle-feeding and manure collection is common among multiple landowners, Rowan said, and others need gravel for access roads to cattle-feeding grounds, off-stream water developments, fencing and more.

When landowners build the concrete pads for cattle feeding areas and manure collection, they clean the pads with a backhoe and haul the manure to a storage location where they can work it into the soil as fertilizer later in the year. Rowan helps them with technical information on how much manure to work into the soil at agronomic rates per manure management plans.

"The manure is contained, it's cleaned out, and it's hauled to the fields where we can work it into the soil later in the year," Arnzen says. "The feeding area is so clean I can almost feed in my tennis shoes."

At his ranch, Arnzen works the manure into his hay ground, using it to rebuild rocky and gravel areas with thin top soil. Arnzen spent extra funds out of his own pocket to build a roof on top of the cattle-feeding concrete pad to create a low-roof barn, measuring 40x60 feet.

Arnzen fenced off Red Rock Creek about 15 years ago on his ranch in another conservation project. He installed off-stream water troughs for his livestock at that time. He's really enjoying the benefits of the latest improvements.

"That mud was a really nasty problem," he says. "We're not going to have cattle wallowing in mud up to their chest or chaining up tractors to get out to the feed grounds."

Seeing many of his neighbors getting enthused about the improvements is pretty neat, too. "We're trying to eliminate the mud and the sediment running off into the creek," he said. "Getting a lot of roads graveled, putting cattle on concrete, and putting in water developments. We're done a lot of work, and people are pleased with the results. It's a good thing."

As for Red Rock Creek water quality, Arnzen said the improvements have got to help.

According to Rowan, in treating multiple lands over a three-mile reach of

Fencing cattle away from the creek , wet and muddy spots.

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New feeding pad with roof limits time cattle spend in the mud.

Red Rock Creek, the benefits of BMPs being installed on 11 ranches include:

- A reduction of 400 tons of sediment flowing into the creek.
- 8 pounds of nitrogen/year
- 6 pounds of phosphorous/year
- 99 percent reduction in bacteria (E.coli) in treated areas.
- 25 percent shade increase in Red Rock Creek, which should improve with temperature issues.

As a landowner who raises sheep and horses on her property, Rowan says she really enjoys working with landowners on BMPs to improve water quality. "These kinds of projects are my favorites – I like to work with livestock producers," she says.

Rowan will be applying for another §319 grant to help additional Idaho County landowners waiting to install BMPs in the Red Rock Creek or Cottonwood Creek drainages.

"It's quite heartwarming to hear about Idaho County landowners being so proactive to solve problems on their home ranch and improving water quality at the same time," said Teri Murrison, administrator of the Conservation Commission.

"This is a classic example of how our professional staff can help landowners find funding for projects that they couldn't afford on their own. And this is how we roll in Idaho – our conservation professionals work together with landowners to help them solve problems and improve the environment. My hat's off to the people of Idaho County for a job well done!"

Steve Stuebner is a regular contributor to Conservation the Idaho Way.

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