



*Restored, 3-acre pond at the Lazy H Ranch in Atlanta is used for livestock water, aesthetics and fire protection.  
(photo courtesy NRCS)*

## ELMORE DISTRICT ASSISTS LOCAL PARTNERS WITH POND IN ATLANTA, BIG IRRIGATION PROJECT

By Steve Stuebner

In August 2013, the Little Queens wildfire ignited in the outskirts of the tiny town of Atlanta - a historic mining town and the western gateway to the Sawtooth Wilderness, with a population of about 300 people.

The fire blew up to 2,000 acres in a matter of hours.

The U.S. Forest Service dispatched fire crews to the scene. Almost immediately, the fire crew set up a backburn north of Atlanta to prevent the wildfire from threatening the town. It took another 30 days to

control the fire, which burned about 25,000 acres, including a significant portion of 9,363-foot Graylock Mountain, which lords above the town of Atlanta.

Fast forward five years, following the big winter of 2017, a 100-year flood sent a huge debris flow from Little Queens and Graylock Mountain onto the Lazy H Ranch, located in the Little Queens drainage adjacent to Atlanta.

"We had a 100-year flood event, and it brought down a whole mountain of dirt into the valley," said Steve Harmsen, owner of the Lazy H Ranch,

also known as the Pumpkin Creek Ranch. "It was a big event. A lot of people in Atlanta thought it was going to be the end of the world."

The Harmsens had a large pond on their ranch that the family used for watering livestock and horses. The pond also was used by the Atlanta Fire Department to fill up fire trucks. But the debris flow filled the pond to the point where it was plugged with dirt, and it couldn't hold water.

Several years ago, the Harmsens approached the Natural Resources Conservation Service about restoring



the pond. Connie Tharp, District Conservationist for NRCS in Elmore County, assisted them with obtaining an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) grant.

The grant covered a large share of the cost of restoring pond at the Lazy H Ranch, while the Harmsens provided the landowner cost-share, and the Elmore Soil and Water Conservation District contributed funds to set up a water hookup, pipeline and filter that would allow fire trucks to pump water out of the pond when needed.

Atlanta Fire Chief Gene Haught was pleased to find a solution. "I was trying to talk to a number of agencies to deal with the problem," Haught said. "I was telling the Forest Service, hey, you need to come and get your dirt. I was getting really frustrated."

But then, Haught stopped in to see the Elmore Soil and Water Conservation District staff and Connie Tharp in the local NRCS office. The idea came up that Atlanta could partner with the Elmore District and the landowner at the Lazy H Ranch to put together a private-public partnership project.

"Connie was like an angel from heaven," Haught says. "The pond



*Little Queens wildfire (courtesy Jim Friend).*

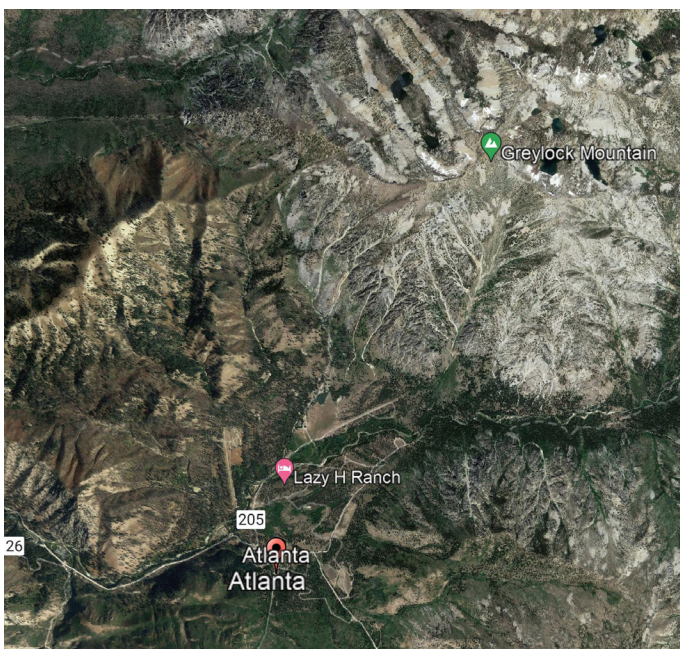
looks great now. It's back to its original size."

Chris McDaniel, a supervisor on the Elmore District board, said the Atlanta pond project was critical for the local, remote community. "We thought it was pretty important to step up to help them with a community outreach project with conservation benefits," he said.

funding the fire-suppression portion of the pond project. "It's going to benefit everyone in Atlanta and in the surrounding basin, he said.

Without the pond, there are no other sources of water that would work, he said. The Middle Fork of the Boise River is too shallow for aircraft to use, and the river is hard to access with a fire truck. They have 45,000 gallons of water in storage, but that can get consumed quickly.

"The pond is a vital resource for us,"



*Atlanta, Lazy H Ranch and Graylock Mountain location.*

Haught notes the lake will be available to Atlanta and Forest Service fire trucks, plus it's also available if helicopters need to dip into the pond for wildfire suppression, Haught said. The pipeline is deep enough below the surface that even when the pond freezes in the winter, they can still pump water out of it.

Haught thanked the Elmore District for

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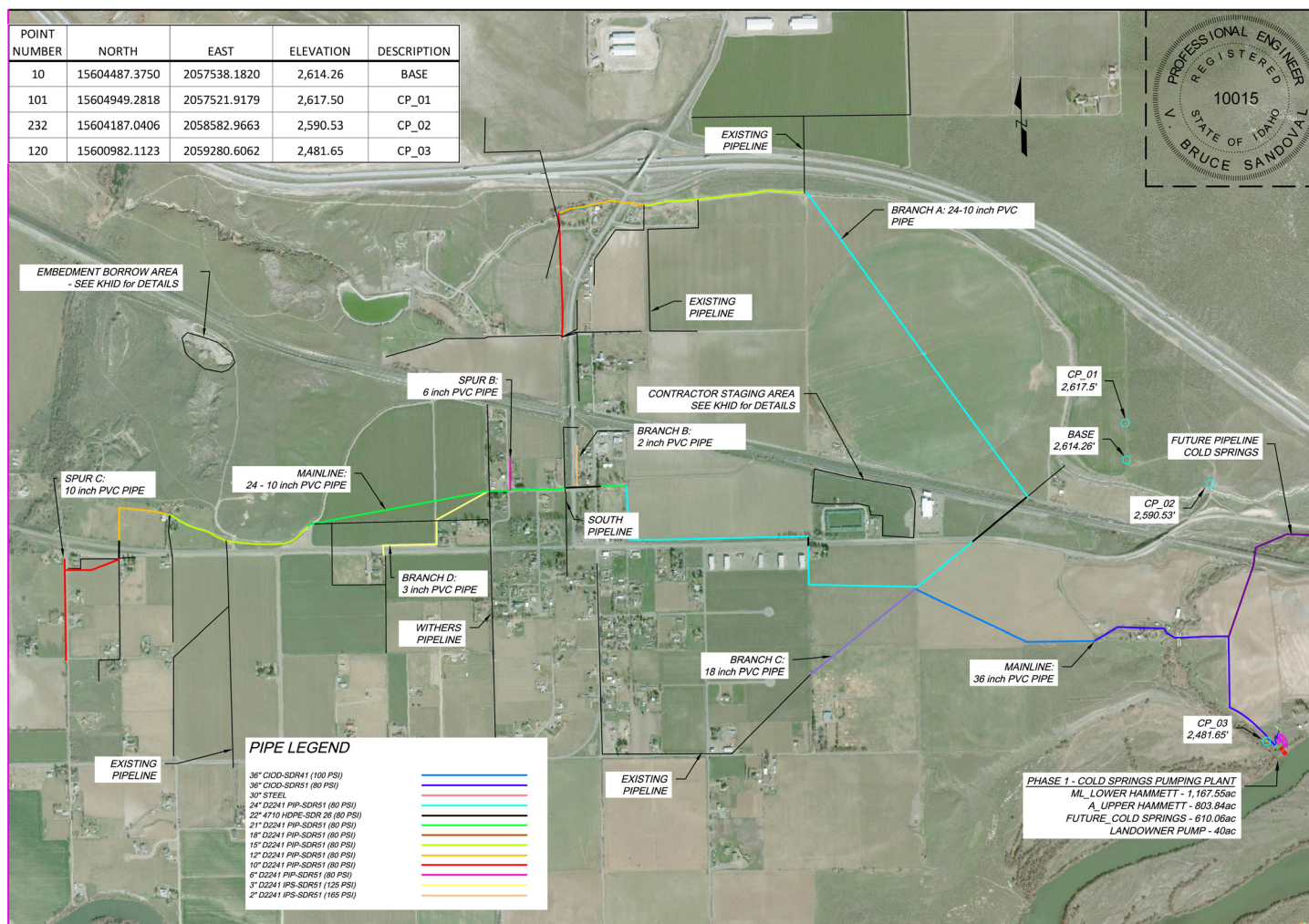


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*Engineering drawing of irrigation efficiency project depicts the pipeline network from the diversion on the Snake River, far right, to more than 120 water users in the Hammett area. (Courtesy NRCS)*

Haught says. "I can't say enough good about all of our partners in this project."

### **New irrigation pipeline for King Hill Irrigation District**

The King Hill Irrigation District has been working on putting together a major irrigation-efficiency pipeline project to benefit local irrigators and farmers in the Hammett area. The King Hill District put together a funding package that includes a NRCS EQIP grant, an Aging Infrastructure Grant from the Idaho Water Resource Board, a low-interest loan from the Water Board, and a Water Quality Program for Agriculture (WQPA) grant from the Conservation Commission.

The King Hill District was awarded all of the above to make the \$5 million

project work. The WQPA grant of \$275,000 helped make the project balance financially after high inflation drove the cost of irrigation pipe to a point where the project was in the hole, officials said.

"We were over budget and in a deficit, and then we got the WQPA grant, and that was huge to put everything back in the black," said John Hafen, manager of the King Hill Irrigation District.

The pipeline project will divert water from the Snake River and pump uphill to participating farms, covering a distance of 5-plus miles. A total of about 120 water users are participating, serving about 2,000 acres of farm and ranchland.

By going from an open ditch to

enclosed pipeline, the project will eliminate 20-25 percent seepage losses in the open irrigation ditches, Hafen said. All told, when the project is completed, it will result in a 35 percent increase in water use efficiency, saving water that might be lost to seepage, long deliveries, tail water loss, and evaporation.

"We've got a lot of great people working with us on this project," Hafen said. "Plus, the man upstairs was very gracious to us. The construction contractors are staging materials right now, and we hope to have it all completed so it's ready for the next irrigation season."

### **NACD grant funds staff person for NRCS office in Elmore County**

The Elmore District and local NRCS





office rely heavily on one another and have a great and valuable partnership. Through a grant with the National Association of Conservation Districts, the Elmore District is partnering with the Bruneau River District to fund a full-time employee in the NRCS Elmore County office.

Each District provides matching funds (\$5,000 each) to receive NACD funding to pay for a full-time employee who works out of the Mountain Home NRCS office. The employee, Erick Peterson, works under the direction of Tharp, assisting with NRCS EQIP contracts and field work.

"Oh my gosh, that position has been so helpful," Tharp says. "And I just had two staff members leave the office. We are approved for 5 positions in this office, and right now we have two. Eric is one of them."

"Erick has been instrumental in implementing conservation projects, overseeing construction, planning and more. I've been very fortunate to have



*Mountain Home students learn about macroinvertebrates, top, and wildlife, above, during 9th Grade Conservation Field Day in Bruneau.  
(Photo courtesy Elmore SWCD)*

him here."

The NRCS has had challenging problem with keeping the positions filled in their local field offices, adds McDaniel. He noted that during the Trump administration, NRCS had a hiring freeze in place. And more recently, it's been challenging for any employer to keep employees during the covid era.

Applying for the NACD grant "is something we're doing to help our conservation partners," McDaniel says. "Connie does amazing work. It's important for her to have enough staff to serve our community."

#### **Education outreach**

The Elmore District typically holds a 9th grade field day for the students





*Wildlife skulls, left, and lessons on fish anatomy courtesy IDFG. (Photo courtesy Elmore SWCD)*

of the Mountain Home School District and grants a scholarship for a few students to attend a Natural Resources Camp. In 2022, the District funded scholarships for four students to attend the Natural Resources Camp, sponsored by the University of Idaho, near Hailey.

"They had a wonderful time," McDaniel says. "They came back and gave us a report afterwards. Clearly, they learned a lot. And hopefully it will inspire them if they might be

thinking focusing on natural resources in college or their career."

For the 9th Grade Conservation Field Day, students from Mountain Home High School are bused to Gingerich Farms in Bruneau in the morning. The students split into groups, and each group stops at different stations to learn about soils, water, wildlife and more – sometimes with hands-on activities. Each presentation lasts about 20-30 minutes.

The field day wraps up at Bruneau Dunes State Park, where the students have lunch and hear a presentation from park rangers about how the sand dunes were formed and the fact that the park features North America's tallest single-structured dune, 470 feet high.

*Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.*

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