



One of four new pivots installed on the Split River Ranch. The project will cut water use by more than 50%, reduce labor and increase crop yield. (photo courtesy Lemhi SWCD)

CONSERVATION PROJECTS SAVE WATER & FISH PLUS ENHANCE RANCH OPERATIONS IN LEMHI VALLEY

By Steve Stuebner

Lemhi Valley landowners Spiro Daskalos and Amanda Schramm are both quite pleased about two, new significant ag and river conservation projects being installed on their properties next to Hayden Creek and the Lemhi River.

Planned and funded in partnership with the Lemhi Soil and Water Conservation District and a host of other agencies, the conservation projects will save water, reduce sediment runoff into the Lemhi River and improve fish habitat for imperiled Snake River Chinook salmon, steelhead, bull trout and resident fish.

Daskalos, owner of the Split River Ranch, is getting four new pivot

sprinklers to replace a flood-irrigation system on about 50 acres of farmland where he typically grows alfalfa on the Split River Ranch. The pivots are going to save about half of the water he normally uses to raise alfalfa, and greatly reduce labor, he said.

"I'm pretty excited about it," Daskalos says. "It's going to be a lot less labor. I can flip the switch and have all four pivots running at once. Now my daughter will have more time to work on other projects than setting up irrigation lines."

"They're brand new shiny pivots that have been installed since last fall," added Chris Gaughan, project manager for the Lemhi District. "The water savings from that project will flow into the Lemhi River."

Schramm has 20 acres of land with riverfront access to the Lemhi River adjacent to the Hayden Creek fishing access location managed by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. She has two horses on the property.

The Lemhi River re-route project on her property will improve habitat for salmon, steelhead, bull trout and resident fish, and it will actually move the river closer to her house, where she can enjoy it. Back in the day, the Lemhi River had been straightened by road construction crews when Idaho State Highway 28 was built.

"I'm enjoying the project quite a bit, so far," Schramm says. "Now they're putting in all of these nice meanders into the stream channel with woody material for fish habitat. And I'm

getting a new bridge and a new driveway. If I can contribute to the cause of river- and fish-restoration, I'm all for it."

In this profile story on the Lemhi District, we are spotlighting the conservation projects on the Split River Ranch and Schramm's property, education outreach projects, and a new diversion at L-45 on the Lemhi River planned for 2024.

The Lemhi District has a long history of engaging in proactive ag conservation and fish habitat improvement projects in the Lemhi River Valley, dating back to the early 1990s, when Snake River Chinook and steelhead were protected under the Endangered Species Act. Led originally by Lemhi SWCD Project Manager Ralph Swift



*Amanda Schramm's horses munch on hay during the long winter of 2023.
(photo courtesy Amanda Schramm)*

and Lemhi Supervisors Bruce Mulkey and Don Olson, the District formed the "Model Watershed" project 30 years ago to work on conservation

projects to save diminishing populations of salmon, steelhead and resident fish.

Mulkey and Olson remember the good old days when thousands of Chinook spawned in the Lemhi River.

"I used to go down and catch salmon all the time," Olson said in a 1993 Incredible Idaho video produced by Steve Stuebner for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game and KTVB-TV Channel 7 in Boise. "It was a big deal when we was kids. We used to come down to this pool here, and the

salmon would lodge in here, and man you'd ride 'em and chase 'em and do all kinds of fun stuff."

So far, the fish populations are hanging on, and the Lemhi District has been a key partner in many conservation projects in the valley over the years. Much of the overall coordination nowadays is facilitated by the Upper Salmon River Basin Watershed Project, which is staffed by the Governor's Office of Species Conservation in Salmon.



Stream restoration work on Hayden Creek on the Schramm property. (photo courtesy Lemhi SWCD)

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*New clear-span bridge to the Schramm property is built in a way that has no impact on the river.
(courtesy Lemhi SWCD)*

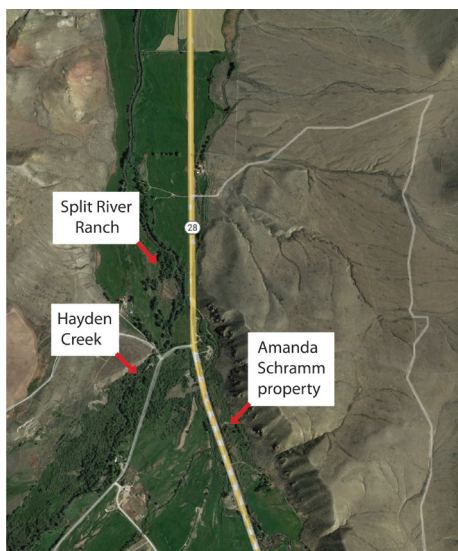
The Upper Salmon Basin project is carrying on the work started by the Model Watershed, but at a larger scale, including the Upper Salmon watershed and the Pahsimeroi River Valley.

Chinook salmon populations in the Lemhi River spawn adjacent to private lands in the valley, where ranchers graze livestock on irrigated pastures. Landowners engaged in conservation projects strive to do what they can for the fish, but the Lemhi District and the Upper Salmon Basin Watershed Project officials also ensure the projects enhance the value of participating ranches.

They want to ensure that working lands remain working for the benefit of the local economy.

Leadore rancher and Lemhi District Chairman Curtis Beyeler noted that it's equally important today to work with multiple partners to raise funds for ag improvements on Lemhi Valley ranches and improve fish habitat in the Lemhi River. But they always want to make sure that the projects provide a net gain for landowners.

"When we do a project, it's got to keep the landowner whole," Beyeler



said. "If you look at the ag land in the Lemhi Valley, ranching and farming are our lifeblood. We make sure that our projects help the resource and the environment. The two go hand in hand."

The Split River Ranch and the Middle Lemhi Hayden Reach projects were planned in coordination with the Upper Salmon Basin Watershed Program, the Lemhi District, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Trout Unlimited, and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Project funds came from the NRCS EQIP

program, the Bonneville Power Administration's Pacific Coast Recovery Funds, and the SWC Water Quality Program for Agriculture. The landowners provided cost-share funds as well.

The river-restoration project on the Split River Ranch will restore about one-quarter mile of the Lemhi River by working to re-route the river into more a natural meandering stream course. The river-restoration project also involves a portion of Hayden Creek, where it flows into the Lemhi River. The Bureau of Reclamation did the design work on the project, working with IDFG and TU. A local contractor, H&N Excavation in Salmon, is doing the pivot installation. Project cost is approximately \$250,000.

The Middle Lemhi Hayden Reach project will re-route the river over the course of about 800 yards, Gaughan said. Quadrant Engineering in Boise did the design work in consultation with IDFG. Project cost is about \$500,000. Contractor is Boyd Foster Backhoe Services in Leadore.

"Both projects are a total channel re-route with all new meanders,"

Gaughan said. “Both of these projects will complement each other in this location where Hayden Creek flows into the Lemhi River. The juvenile fish need refuge areas where they can get off the treadmill of high water flows and hide out in pools and eddies along the way.

“You also have the nutrient-rich Lemhi water in this area mixing with cold clear Hayden Creek water,” he said. “The fish are drawn to that.”

In general, the projects benefit juvenile fish with over-wintering habitat with the installation of woody materials in the stream meanders for hiding cover. And the projects benefit adult fish, too.

Jeff Diluccia, staff biologist for IDFG in Salmon, said both river-restoration projects are located in a reach of the Lemhi River that has been prioritized for restoration. They occur at the downstream end of the Chinook salmon primary spawning areas in the Lemhi River and Hayden Creek.

“Studies in the past have demonstrated that this reach is used by adult salmon that stage throughout the summer prior to spawning,” Diluccia said. “We observe high numbers of juvenile salmon fry entering this reach that were displaced from upstream sources. We document high densities of juvenile salmon and steelhead summer parr that rear in this reach in the summer. The project provides improved habitat quantity and quality for these important life stages, and hopefully this will translate into improved growth and survival of these fish.”

The habitat projects are restoring the Lemhi River to a more natural historic function, he noted. Project enhancements will increase the sinuosity of the main channel, create lateral side channels that were once numerous throughout the basin, add to channel complexity with woody debris, and the river banks will be graded to increase the lateral

inundation of river water, he said.

“The Lemhi River is such a precious resource,” Daskolas said. “The enhancement work is really going to improve the fish habitat with all of the new bends and side channels. It’s going to be a huge benefit for the fish, and that’s a great thing.”

Daskolas noted that he recently inked a conservation easement with The Nature Conservancy. “That’s how committed we are to conservation,” he said.

The river design on Schramm’s property splits the river into two channels with a flood plain in between, she said. “I’ve been seeing the juvenile fish jumping in the stream. With the river being located closer to my house, it’s easier to see what’s going on, and that’s kind of fun.”

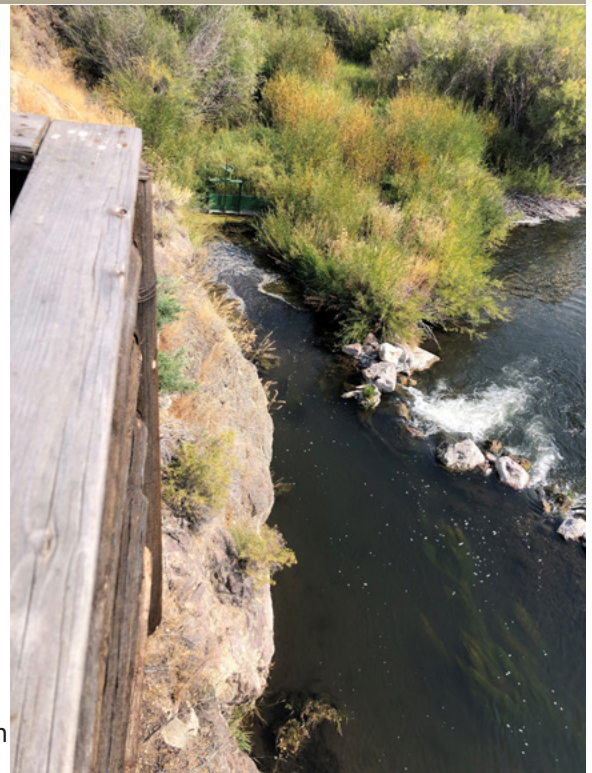
L-45 Diversion to be replaced

Beyeler is perhaps most excited about a new project coming up next year in which the Lemhi District will replace the L-45 Diversion on the Lemhi River with a new, modern fish-friendly diversion. “That one is all screwed up right now,” he said. “The landowner can’t get water out of the diversion so they have to push up rocks and stuff in the river to make sure they get their water.”

The project is in the 30 percent design phase at the moment, Gaughan said. It will be funded by a Section §319 water quality grant from the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality.

“This project will help the irrigator get his water without as much annual maintenance, while also reducing the amount of sediment entering the Lemhi River,” Gaughan said.

The new diversion also will enhance juvenile fish habitat.



The L-45 Diversion on the Lemhi River. It will be replaced by a modern, fish-friendly diversion next year. (photo by Lemhi SWCD)

Education projects

The Lemhi Soil and Water Conservation District held its annual poster contest for students in the 6th grade from Salmon Jr./Sr. High School and 5th and 6th grade students from The Leadore School.

The purpose of the poster contest is to educate students about issues that affect our land and water sources. This year’s theme was “Healthy Soil, Healthy Life.”

Winning students each received prize money: \$30 for first place, \$20 for second, \$10 for third.

The top 3 placing posters advanced to the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts Division VI meeting, held in Salmon on October 19th where the students competed against winners from the other soil and water conservation districts in Division VI.

The poster winners were 1st Baylee Halle, 2nd Logan Hanson, 3rd Ellee Mae Painter all from Salmon.



During Ag week, March 20th-24th, Salmon kids make edible soil cups for the theme, "Cultivating Our Legacy."

Additional education outreach projects that the District works on each year:

- Lemhi County Fair: Shared an educational booth with Farm Service Agency and NRCS.
- NACD Poster Contest: Sponsored and presented the NACD poster contest to 72 local 6th graders in conjunction with the 2022 theme "Healthy Soil, Healthy Life."
- National Agriculture Week: Sponsored and participated in National Agriculture Week

activities in Lemhi County. Second grade students at Pioneer Elementary had the opportunity to build their own edible soil cup. FFA students assisted.

For more information on the Lemhi District, contact Becky Coffey at lsxcd@hotmail.com or 208-756-3211

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



Poster contest winners Baylee Halle, left, 1st place, and Ellee Mae Painter, 3rd place.

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For more information about WQPA or assistance to get the application process started, please contact your local SWCC staff person or Loretta Strickland at loretta.strickland@swc.idaho.gov.

