



New side-channel under construction near Tendoy, Idaho, on the Lemhi River. (Courtesy Lemhi SWCD)

LEMHI DISTRICT WORKS WITH RANCHER TO CREATE SIDE-CHANNEL FISH ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

By Steve Stuebner

Cecil and Judi Bailey-Jackson own a ranch on hallowed ground in the Lemhi River bottoms, east of Salmon, where Kenney Creek flows into the river.

This is an area that's thought to be the birthplace of Sacajawea of the Lemhi-Shoshone Tribe, a key team member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. And it's the location of a 585-acre conservation easement, signed in 2011 by the Lemhi Regional Land Trust with the Tonsmeire family to preserve the fish and wildlife habitat in the river bottoms.

The Jacksons purchased the ranch from Fran Tonsmeire 12 years ago. "This place has quite a history," Cecil Jackson said. "It also has the first fruit trees that were planted in Lemhi County, trees that are still alive today."

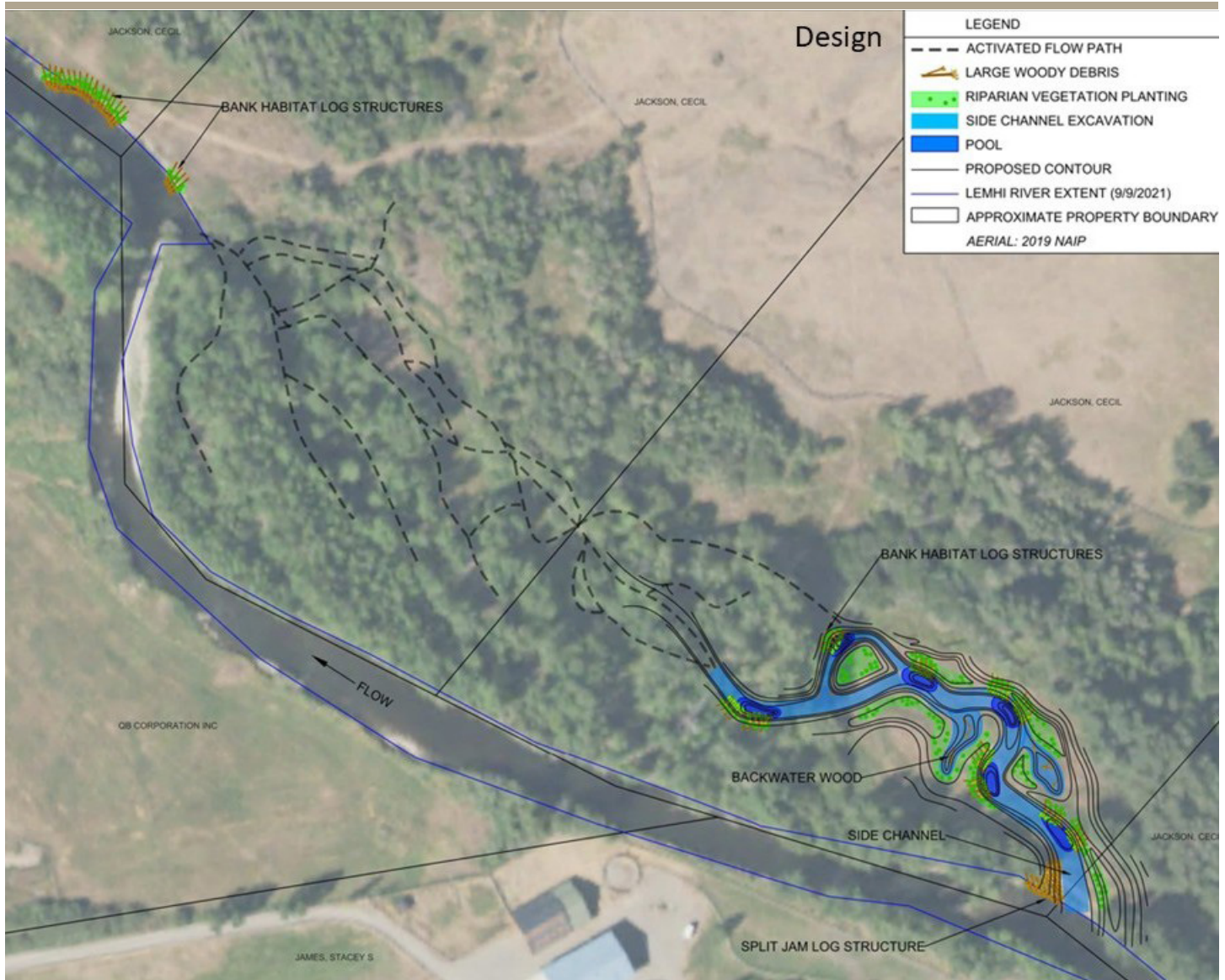
About five years ago, Daniel Bertram, Species Program Manager/Policy Advisor for the Governor's Office of Species (OSC) Conservation in Salmon, approached Jackson to see if he might be open to a fish habitat-enhancement project in the Kenney Creek-Lemhi River bottom lands.

"We were interested in the

project because it fit right in with our philosophy and our ranch operation," Jackson said. "We have the conservation easement in place, and the riparian areas in the river bottoms are fenced off from cattle."

The Jacksons and the Lemhi Soil and Water Conservation District partnered on the fish-enhancement project along with OSC, and Driggs-based Intermountain Aquatics, Inc., which specializes in environmental consulting and habitat restoration work.

The \$480,000 project is expected to benefit imperiled Chinook salmon and steelhead in the Lemhi River



Design map shows the configuration of the new side-channel fish habitat enhancement area in the Lemhi River floodplain. (Courtesy Intermountain Aquatics, Inc.)

Basin, and juvenile fish in particular. The project was mostly completed last summer and fall. More shrub planting and seeding will occur this year to finish it.

“It’s a really, really good project,” said Steve Fisher, Project Manager for the Lemhi SWCD. “I mean, it had an immediate impact. As soon as they finished the stream-channel work, you could see juvenile fish swimming around immediately.”

“So far, it’s turned out great,” Jackson added. “It sure impacted the waterfowl – we’ve had a huge increase in ducks and geese this spring.”

Project design

The Lemhi SWCD submitted a proposal to Idaho OSC for funding the construction of stream-channel habitat improvements on a 0.3-mile segment of the Lemhi River, located just downstream from the confluence of Kenney Creek.

Lemhi SWCD secured \$359,068 in Pacific Coast Salmon Recovery Funds and \$120,626 in non-federal match from the Bonneville Power Administration to finance the project.

Pre-project habitat conditions include a straightened, channelized

river segment confined by agricultural land, containing no side

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channel or floodplain connectivity through a high-quality riparian forest, officials said.

The project envisioned building approximately 1,000 linear feet of side channel habitat and reconnecting approximately 5 acres of abandoned floodplain. The design took advantage of an existing spring and a series of swales to create a more complex side channel network, said Jason Chircop of Intermountain Aquatics (IMA), who oversaw the project design and construction.

The project will benefit juvenile salmon and steelhead in particular, Chircop said, as well as resident fish.

“Juvenile salmonids require different habitat than adults. They prefer side channels with heavy cover and slower-moving currents to grow before they begin their journey to the ocean,” he said.

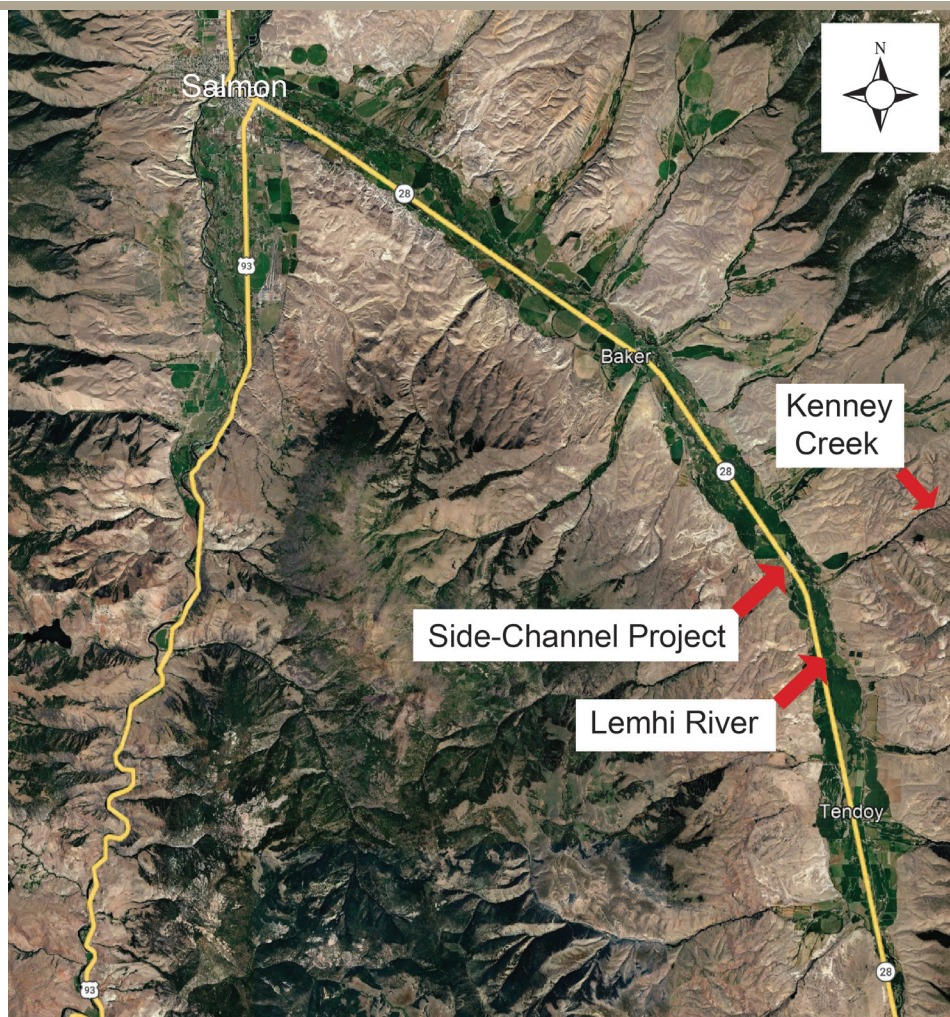
The new side channel flows into a series of braided channels and beaver habitat in the Lemhi River forest bottoms before re-joining the river.

“The project creates more complex river bottom habitat with different types of cover and water depths,” he said. “That will hopefully result in increased survival of juvenile fish.”

Chircop said there were a number of factors that converged to make the Kenney Creek/Lemhi River fish-enhancement project successful:

- A willing, conservation-minded landowner.
- No concerns about the project impacting existing infrastructure.
- A healthy riparian forest colonized by beavers.
- A 585-acre conservation easement protecting the Kenney Creek/Lemhi River bottoms area.

“All of those things made the project pretty ideal,” Chircop said.



Map of project location in the Lemhi River Valley, downstream from the confluence with Kenney Creek. (SWCC map)

Bird Excavation in Leadore performed the work as the construction contractor. The excavation operator imported the side channel design into a GPS unit on board the excavator, and he was able to cut in the new channels, following the design plans.

“I thought it turned out great,” Chircop said. “We saw little fish in the side channels within a couple of days when the water came in. It should be a huge win for salmon and steelhead.”

As part of the project, they installed a series of woody structures, individual logs, and excavated pools within the excavated side channel. Since the project site is on the downstream end of the primary

Chinook salmon production areas in the Lemhi Basin, it’s a strategic place to do enhancement work, officials said.

Permitting

A right of way permit was required to connect the new access route to the project site to the county road. Lemhi SWCD officials obtained all necessary permits including the right of way, floodplain, and the Army Corps of Engineers-Idaho Department of Water Resources wetlands and stream-alteration permit by June 2025.

Last summer, the Lemhi District received the final signed and stamped design from IMA. There was a pre-construction meeting held in late June. IMA had the site

staked and was present for the pre-construction meeting to give direction and answer questions. The Lemhi District ordered vegetation plantings in advance from a new local vendor, Service Berry Nursery.

Project fits with landowner philosophy

The Jacksons run a regenerative cattle ranch on their Lemhi River property. They own about one mile of Lemhi River frontage.

They have a 90-head cattle herd that stays on their property year-round. They are engaged in active or intensive management, with small groups of cattle grazing small areas of pasture at a time, often referred to as “mob grazing.” They keep the cattle on the move to new pastures, controlling the animals with electric fencing.

Both Cecil Jackson and his wife, Judi, have day jobs at the local hospital in Salmon, so they have a busy life running the ranch and working full-time jobs.

“My wife and I are interested in habitat preservation and making the land work for us,” Jackson said. “We have a productive ranch, and we need to make a profit. But we’re trying to get to a point where the cows do most of the work.”

Charlie Williams, Executive Director of the Lemhi Regional Land Trust, said she was happy to see a habitat-improvement project occur in the Kenney Creek/Lemhi River bottoms area, where the land trust has a



Ground-level view of fish habitat features in the new side channel. (Courtesy IMA)

conservation easement.

“We were always interested in doing a habitat project in there,” she said. “We were like, you’re good to go!”

The Lemhi District was “very helpful,”

Jackson said. “Everybody we worked with was great.”

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

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