

Ranchers, natural resource managers work together

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Bryan Clark / bclark@postregister.com Carl Lufkin, who manages Leadore Angus Ranch, said production agriculture and endangered species protection can go hand-in-hand if ranchers and natural resource regulators can work together. Bryan Clark / Post Register



Bryan Clark / bclark@postregister.com Nikos Monoyios, a retired mutual fund manager and owner of Eagle Valley Ranch, has donated almost 6,000 acres of conservation easements to the Lemhi Regional Land Trust, which will keep the land from being subdivided and greatly restrict building. Bryan Clark / Post Register



Bryan Clark / bclark@postregister.com There are hundreds of irrigation diversions along the Lemhi River. Ranchers and Idaho Fish and Game officials have worked for decades to add screens that keep fish from being trapped in irrigation systems. Bryan Clark / Post Register



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Bryan Clark / bclark@postregister.com Paddy Murphy, a program manager for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, said screening helps to keep fish from being diverted from the river into irrigation systems. Bryan Clark / Post Register

By BRYAN CLARK

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SALMON — Some ranchers and natural resources managers have a history of not getting along, as indicated by the standoff earlier this year between Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy and the Bureau of Land Management.

But things are different in Lemhi County, where ranchers, conservation groups and government agencies have been working together to help fish.

As a result, creeks that had run dry for more than a century have been reconnected to the Lemhi River, allowing steelhead to travel up them to spawn. Years ago, fisheries experts worried that Chinook salmon would disappear from the river. Today, the river is filled with spawning nests or “redds.”

Michael Edmondson is a species biologist and program manager with the Office of Species Conservation.

“This is a great year for fish returns. We’ve seen it on the ground,” he said. “We’re really thankful to the ag community.”

Both ranchers and natural resource officials said it is a unique spirit of cooperation that has made it all possible.

“It’s just phenomenal when everyone is willing to talk,” said Linda Price, a BLM field manager based in Salmon. “I’ve worked for the BLM for 25 years, and I’ve seen a lot of BLM offices around the southwest. This area here is unprecedented in the number and the willingness of people who will come to the table and talk before an issue becomes an issue.”

The 8 percent solution

Cooperation is a necessity in Lemhi County, in part due to an unusual pattern of land ownership. Most of Lemhi County is publicly owned land — only about 8 percent is private.

Throughout the Lemhi Valley, most of the private land is in the flat bottomlands. The slopes of the surrounding mountains mostly are held by the BLM, and higher up, most of the land is owned by the Forest Service.

Nearly all of the salmon and steelhead spawning grounds are found in that 8 percent, Paddy Murphy said.

Murphy, a program coordinator for Idaho Department of Fish and Game, is in charge of a program to install and maintain fish screens in the Upper Salmon River Basin. The screens are designed to keep fish from becoming trapped in irrigation diversions.

“That’s the cooperative nature that this basin has: (Ranchers) let a government agency, Fish and Game, have access to a fish screen site that we basically own on their property,” Murphy said. “That’s a huge commitment by the landowners. If we didn’t have these, I personally think Chinook salmon would have blinked out in the Lemhi decades ago.”

Ranchers, on the other hand, don’t own enough land to run viable operations. They rely on BLM land to provide room for grazing.

Carl Lufkin, who manages Leadore Angus Ranch, showed off the verdant shores of Big Springs Creek, mostly located on the ranch. Lufkin only grazes cattle near stream banks during the winter, when the ground is frozen and erosion is minimized. This year, more than 600 rainbow trout redds were counted in the creek.

“In order to be a year-round functional operation in this area, we need public land, and we need the opportunity to get these cattle away from this critical habitat for a period in the summer,” Lufkin said.

Fending off development

Lemhi ranchers also have been involved with private groups, donating or selling off the right to one day turn their ranch into a subdivision.

Nikos Monoyios, a retired mutual fund manager who owns Eagle Valley Ranch, donated nearly 6,000 acres worth of conservation easements to the Lemhi Regional Land Trust. His donations were the first made to the group and remain the largest.

“It’s incredibly significant because it’s the size of a watershed,” said Kirsten Troy, executive director of the land trust.

Monoyios bought the first piece of his ranch in 2003, and after retiring in 2008, went to live on the ranch most of the year.

“We soon realized that this business was a very vital part of the community here, and we made a commitment to preserve it — not only because it helps the economy of Lemhi County, but it’s also compatible with the values of conservation and enhancing the environment,” he said.

The easement includes almost all of Bohannon Creek, an important tributary that provides habitat for spawning fish.

Monoyios also has changed the way he irrigates his 2,000 acres of pasture and hay, replacing a leaky ditch-based system with 11,000 feet of irrigation pipe. The pipe system is more efficient, so more water stays in Bohannon Creek. More water means more fish.

This year 35 steelhead redds were counted in Bohannon Creek. Before 2003, none had been documented, Murphy said.

Reconnecting creeks

Rancher Merrill Beyeler holds water rights on Big Timber Creek, which today flows into the Lemhi River. That didn’t used to happen.

“For over 100 years, maybe 150 years, there was no water in Big Timber Creek at this time of the year,” Beyeler said Wednesday. “What we did as ranchers — we wanted to find some way to reconnect these tributaries to the main stem of the Lemhi River.”

They hatched an unusual plan.

“We said, ‘What if we release this water and let it run to the main stem of the Lemhi River, and then we would pump water back from the main stem of the Lemhi River back to our fields?’ ” Beyeler said.

In 2010 they did just that. Today, Big Timber Creek is connected to the Lemhi River all year. Pockets of fish that once were cut off from the larger population are traveling out of the creek — a long way out of the creek.

“You would think that having the creek disconnected from the main stem of the Lemhi, all of that genetic material would kind of be lost,” Beyeler said. “But the very first year we reconnected it, they had done some pit tagging of fish in Big Timber Creek.

“One of those fish moved out of Big Timber Creek, down the Lemhi and pinged through every pit race station all the way to the Pacific Ocean. That’s one of those things that just kind of makes you smile inside.”

Last year, Beyeler’s efforts were recognized nationally when he received the BLM’s Rangeland Stewardship award.

Progress toward a healthy ecosystem on the Lemhi Valley has been substantial, Murphy said.

“We have some work to do, but we’re making some really good progress.... We are leaps and bound from where we thought we would be,” he said.

That’s important to Beyeler, too.

“If we lose part of this,” he said, gesturing with his hand, “we lose the whole of it.”

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