Model Watershed News

"To Protect, Restore and Enhance Fish Habitat"

NEWS ABOUT RESTORING FISH IN CENTRAL IDAHO SUMMER 1997

Take a Look at Our Accomplishments !!

A list of accomplishments are usually on an inside page of our newsletter, but because it has been a while since our last publication, and there have been so many changes and accomplishments, I decided to make it our number one article.

Lets start off by introducing our new Project Coordinator, Jude Trapani. Jude has been a resident of Salmon for the past 5 years. His previous employment was with the Bureau of Land Management as a Fisheries Biologist. He isn't new to the Model Watershed Project though, as he has been a member of the Technical Committee since its inception back in 1993. Our previous coordinator, Ralph Swift, transferred to Kansas to work with the "High Plains Pilot Project." There is e about Ralph on Page 3.

The Lemhi and Custer Soil and Water Conservation District's (SWCD) also have a larger stake in the project. They have hired a hay and pasture land planner to assist the coordinator. His name is Allen Bradbury. Allen is a Challis native, but has lived for the last 5 years in Fort Collins, Colorado where he was employed by Colorado State University.

The one thing that has remained constant is the Office Coordinator. Although she spent a brief stint as Acting Coordinator, Katie Slavin is on duty every morning from 7:30 until noon. She is in charge of all the details that need taken care of.

Of course, volunteers remain a large part of our program. The Custer and Lemhi SWCD's and the Model Watershed Advisory Committee work closely with the Coordinator to oversee and approve projects. The Districts have also received a grant from Bonneville Power Administration to use in fish passage and habitat improvement projects. We also rely on Scott Turner, an Advisory Board Member, to guide our "Hatch Box" gram. Another volunteer, Bethany Smith, helps him with some of the sites.

Now, on to our accomplishments. These projects are not solely the work of the Model Watershed, but I think it is safe to say that most of them would not have been actualized without our program.

The East Fork has been the focus of some major streambank stabilization on the Baker Ranch. This is for the purpose of protecting agricultural land, irrigation diversions, and fish habitat.

The Bureau of Reclamation has played an important role as a funding source with projects on the Lemhi River. The L-3A diversion for the Dan French Ranch is one example. A proposal was made to build a large structure similar to the L-6 diversion near the 28 Club, but Idaho Fish and Game (IDFG) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) designed a system and fish screen that should work just as well at a fraction of the cost. It was completed in May.

Fencing has been going on in all three Watersheds. Funding has been received from a variety of sources, and over six miles of fences will be completed by Fall. Most of these are a part of a total ranch management system for streambank and riparian enhancement and should not be considered exclusion fences.

The Hannah Slough project continued with phase two. Local individuals, mining interests, and businesses assisted with this project, along with agencies. Special recognition should be credited to the Custer SWCD that pulled this all together.

Several ditch consolidations have also been realized. They include L-16 & 17 and East Fork 7 & 8. Every time we are able to provide water more efficiently to a landowner by streamlining the system, it saves the tax payer money by eliminating diversions, hence eliminating fish screens, from the rivers. This also reduces the number of obstacles that migrating fish have to pass to get to their destination.

East Fork Update

High water in the East Fork of the Salmon River during the last two years has resulted in some serious streambank erosion. This erosion has caused the stream to change course in a number of places. Large gravel bars have been deposited, leaving in its path, large debris piles and raw streambanks. These raw banks will continue to erode and deposit silt in the River, and the gravel will continue to migrate downstream, unless measures are taken to stabilize the banks.

While some of this is a natural occurrence, having such a dramatic change during a fairly normal high water year is not natural and is an indicator of a river system on the brink of failure. Continued erosion will not only cause further loss of land, but will also result in very unstable fish habitat. A raw straightened stream provides little bank cover for fish habitat and the continued migration of gravel results in micro and macro invertebrates being lost. These invertebrates are the main food source for the fry of salmon and other fish species. The invertebrate that live on the underside of the streams gravels are destroyed if these gravels are rolled downstream each year.

The East Fork watershed is a large drainage that was designed, by nature, to carry large flows of water through a meander path that reduced velocity through its sinuosity, and allowed water to spill out of the banks onto the flood plain. The banks were held by riparian vegetation which consisted of an overstory of willows, alder, birch and cottonwood with sedges and rushes occupying the understory. This riparian vegetation covered the valley floor with open meadows of dryer upland sites intermingled with wetland sloughs.

The East Fork is typical of many streams that were developed for agriculture purposes in the late 1800's. This development included clearing back some of the riparian vegetation to encourage growth of grasses for livestock feed. As these areas were further developed for hay lands and irrigation began, even more stream-side vegetation was cleared.

Several East Fork landowners have requested the assistance of the Natural Resources Conservation Service through the Model Watershed Project to assist them in assessing the problem and develop a plan and a strategy to stabilize the River.

Custer and Lemhi

Soil and Water Conservation Districts

The Custer and Lemhi SWCD's are comprised of volunteers that are elected by their constituen These leaders are dedicated to the conservation and wise-use of the natural resources in their respective District's.

The Custer board members are. Lida Robinson. Chairman; Ted O'Neal, Vice Chair; Rick Philps, Secretary/Treasurer; Jim L. Dowton and Wayne Baker, Members. Their district employee is Karma Bragg.

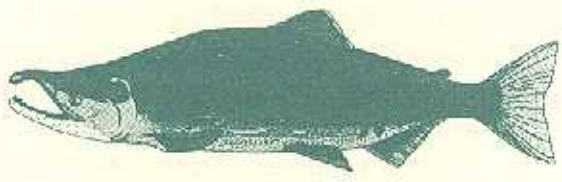
Bruce Mulkey is the Chairman of the Lemhi District. Ed Tolman is Vice Chair; Kelly Thomas, Secretary, Lynn Herbst, Treasurer; and Dale Edwards, Member Katie Slavin is the district employee.

The Districts are the local sponsoring groups of the Model Watershed Project. They are responsible for ensuring local participation and support and are key players in the whole process. There is no other local District or Agency that has the local knowledge and leadership to institute change on private land and water management if it is needed.

District leaders know what is socially and economically feasible in their areas. They are the experts. The District's set a course of direction back in 1991 in their five-year plans. This is the foundation which the Model Watershed Plan was built.

The Districts also play an important roll with project funding. They have both received grants from Bonneville Power Administration for fisheries habitat and passage projects. The Districts also administer funding for other projects through Idaho Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Fish and Wildlife. and the Bureau of Reclamation.

Although Districts are closely tied with the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, they are a separate entity that are funded by the county and state. They are locally led and driven. Contact your local offices for more information on meeting times and policy. The Lemhi number is 208-756-3211 and the Custer number is 208-879-4428.



Ralph's Parting Comments

By Ralph Swift

Normally when I write this column I pretty much have in mind what I want to say and why. I usually tried to focus on a fish habitat issue or goal to bring about my perspective or just to generate thought in the readers mind. But now as I sit at the computer I realize that I will no longer be the Model Watershed Coordinator as of November 12 and the readers will receive this after I am gone.

This does not mean an ending for the Model Watershed Project or Myself. It is a new beginning for both. I am moving to Goodland, Kansas to become the High Plains Pilot Project Coordinator. This project involves 15 counties in the States of Kansas, Colorado and Nebraska. My job is to assist the board of directors in developing this project from the grassroots. Their objectives are to develop acceptable treatments for the conservation of the natural resources, including the human resources, in the High Plains area. This is a real opportunity to continue my career with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and to move closer to my and my wife's families. This was a very difficult decision as we leave two sons in Idaho which they call home.

It is a new beginning for the Model Watershed as the process moves into the implementation phase of the Model Watershed Plan for the Lemhi, Pahsimeroi and East Fork of the Salmon Rivers. Following completion of this plan the del Watershed has been able to marshal considerable nding for project work. The Lemhi and Pahsimeroi have both been selected for project funding under the State Agricultural Water Quality Program. This program is designed to provide cost share agreements for Best Management Practices that are a part of a Resource Management System for the stream and the acres surrounding the stream. These systems will bring about improvements in water quality and fish habitat through improved riparian zones along the streams.

The Custer and Lemhi Soil and Water Conservation Districts will have nearly $300,000 of Bonneville Power Administration funding to work with for habitat improvements and irrigation improvements in 1997. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Forest Service and The Bureau of Land Management have also committed funds to be used through the Lemhi County Riparian Conservation Agreement for projects to benefit private and public land. When these are added with the private landowners cost share, there is enough project dollars to make a considerable dent in implementing the highest priority items of the Model Watershed Plan.

It is also a new beginning for the Watershed Process in the Salmon River Drainage. The change created by replacing the coordinator will allow a reexamination of just what the local people have as a vision for the Salmon River Basin and its sub-watersheds. Should the Lemhi, Pahsimeroi and East Fork be the only watershed involved in the process? Should only salmon habitat be what is critically examined in each watershed or should other resource issues such as Bull Trout, Steelhead, water quality, timber harvest, mining and etc. also be addressed? Should a Watershed Council be developed for the Upper Salmon River that includes both private citizens, local, state and private government from both Custer and Lemhi Counties be formed that would effectively oversee smaller work groups to plan for the future of definable watershed areas? What is the role of the Basin Area Groups and Watershed Groups outlined in the State of Idaho Water Quality Initiative? These and many other issues need to be discussed and decided before any type of action is taken on coordination.

These are both complex and exciting times and hopefully the many different interest groups can come together to shape the issues in a proactive grassroots approach. The success of the Model Watershed to date is the result of such an approach.

As I leave, I wish the Salmon River Country well and know that in the future "The River of No Return" will continue to stand for outstanding white water, folks who care about the resources that provide for their way of life, and groups who work together to make a difference. Rather than for a river with no returning anadromous fish and valleys where young people no longer return to live, work and play.

Editors note. Ralph and his family are doing well in Goodland, Kansas, where they moved in December. They miss the area and the people, and we miss them!