



# Harney County Rancher Caring For The Land

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Photography by Jeremy Hill

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When a rancher or farmer thinks about a succession plan it's usually thought of in terms of business structure and setting up the business for the next generation. Jennifer Williams and her husband Mike who own and ranch the LY Ranch in Harney County, Oregon with their son Arly, have these plans in place but there was another type of succession plan to consider, their water succession plan. Thinking about their son and his wife and their future at LY Ranch, Jennifer and Mike wanted to leave them with a sound infrastructure that would benefit their business, help to bring back birds and

also benefit the many ranches that are downstream from them. "[Some may perceive that ranchers] don't care about the animals that live here, that we just care about the cows and that's not how it goes. It's a balance, if you don't take care of what you have it's going to go away, it's going to break that cycle."

It's all about the water in Harney County and over the years man-made structures altered the flow of water to LY Ranch impacting their business and the birds and wildlife that frequented the land. Where they once had wet meadows, they no longer do and they "wanted it back to the way it was."

*Pictured above: A new concrete diversion structure to more effectively move water to the head gate in the distance which can be opened as needed to flood the meadow with water that lies beyond this gate.*



To positively affect controlling water distribution and help with grazing management, the Williams participated in a program through [Natural Resource Conservation Service \(NRCS\)](#). Originally working with Ed Sparks with the [Malheur National Wildlife Refuge](#) and then with Carlton Strough out of the NRCS Hines, Oregon office, the following projects have been completed in the past two years:

- Six new water control structures with water conveyance ditches were installed. These structures consist of a culvert with screw gates that help check and convey water more evenly and efficiently. This is especially helpful in low water years helping to maximize water use by directing water to a specific field opposed to the water free flowing wherever it wants.
- Two additional concrete diversion structures that can direct water to the eastern or southern fields were added. Again, this is primarily for water distribution efficiency purposes that is especially useful in low water years.
- 7,345 feet of cross section fencing was installed that will now divide their property into 6 independent pastures. By doing this, the potential is there to maximize forage efficiency and more evenly distribute grazing areas. Ultimately this practice will reduce the potential of uneven or overgrazing certain areas, while also allowing forage crops and soils to recover.

*Pictured above: A new head gate that is making it possible for this rancher to control where irrigation water goes within their meadow so they can reliably flood irrigate portions of the field that only had water occasionally in the past. This improves the use of the land for growing meadow hay for cattle, while improving the habitat for birds and wildlife.*



Between the water control structures and new fencing, the Williams have completely renovated their livestock management and flood-irrigation system. In exchange for this infrastructure, they have committed to not haying before July 15 each year to provide habitat for nesting birds. However, the NRCS also understands that forage quality reduces drastically after July 1. As a result, the Williams have an option to follow a set of guidelines that allows haying before July 15.

For the Williams, these projects and water succession planning have given them hope: “It gives us hope, that when we do get water, we can manage it well.”

*Pictured above: A concrete water diversion structure that enables water flow to be managed in different directions as to where water is needed.*

*Pictured to your right: This newly cleared and defined irrigation ditch will more efficiently convey water to the LY Ranch.*

There are projects like this happening all around the basin and the possibility of many, many more as ranchers like Jennifer and her family work on their water succession plan. These programs are made possible by the [NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program \(EQIP\)](#) along with matching funds from the grant High



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