



# How The Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative Manages Diverse Interests

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Photography by Jeremy Hill

November 2019

It's not easy to see the big picture sometimes. We're all busy managing the day to day onslaught of work, home and family obligations, and it's easy to lose sight of the bigger issues at play. This is why the High Desert Partnership performs such an integral role in the community, helping us work together. Where land and water are concerned, a collaborative of the partnership, the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative (HBWI), has brought together a diverse group of voices to talk about how to manage the abundant natural resources in our corner of the basin.

The Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative was born out of the [Malheur National Wildlife's Comprehensive Conservation Plan \(CCP\)](#) process, which took input from local ranchers, agencies and conservation groups. After the CCP was completed, the group wanted to continue the conversation regarding land and water management in the Harney Basin, and the wetlands initiative was born.

Since then, the group has chosen to focus on the restoration of Malheur Lake and maintaining the practice of flood irrigation.

## Restoring Malheur Lake

The rehabilitation of Malheur Lake, which once teemed with birds and aquatic life, is an area of emphasis for HBWI. Carp have devastated the aquatic vegetation, turning the water turbid, which in turn makes it less attractive to migrating birds. Refuge biologists are in the process of modeling different restoration scenarios to make the determination of which one would have the most positive effect on Malheur Lake's aquatic ecosystem.

[Restoring Malheur Lake](#) would have positive impacts, not only for wildlife, but for locals, hunters and tourists who appreciate its cultural significance in the lives of those who have called the Harney Basin home over the years. Refuge wildlife biologist Melinda Martinez noted that the restoration of the lake needs to involve the public and reconcile the way the lake was viewed 50 years ago with the realities of today. "We are all pursuing the same end goal: proper ecological function," she said.

[Ben Cate](#), the ecological coordinator for the High Desert Partnership, grew up in Harney County and knows firsthand the challenges involved in rehabilitating such a large ecological feature. "I spend a lot of time at Malheur Lake to help with research, and I want our community to feel the connection to this lake that I feel. While we can hunt, we can't boat, swim, water ski or do the typical fun recreational lake activities at Malheur Lake," he said. "There is a majesty in appreciating something just for what it is and what it provides to our home."

The reality is that there is much work to be done where the restoration of the lake is concerned, and the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative is confronting those challenges head on.

### **Replacing flood irrigation infrastructure**



The Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative took on the replacement of the [Tyler and Sweek dams](#) because the outcome promotes flood irrigation. The two dams, which are located outside Burns, were about 75 years old and dilapidated. The HBWI identified the Tyler and Sweek dams as ideal candidates for replacement because they are located high up in the system and could potentially affect thousands of acres of migratory bird habitat. Replacing each dam cost about \$500,000, so it was imperative that the wetlands initiative obtain grants to help landowners cover the extensive bill. Work started in September and both dams are now complete.

Flood irrigation across the west has declined considerably in the last 10 to 20 years. This has had an impact on the migrating birds who have relied on that habitat. The Harney Basin is a significant stopover for birds using the Pacific Flyway, and the flood-irrigated meadows here have become more crucial in terms of providing a feeding and resting ground for migrating birds. By helping landowners replace dams and update other infield infrastructure like culverts, ditches and fencing, the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative has ensured that those landowners can continue to flood irrigate their land and provide habitat for migrating birds in the spring.

### **Preserving bird habitat**

The wet meadows in the Harney Basin are crucial to the survival and breeding success of migratory birds and waterfowl alike. [Teresa Wicks](#), East Oregon Field Coordinator for [Portland Audubon](#) and a member of the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative, said that the importance of the wet meadows in the Harney Basin cannot be understated. “There’s been some work that has shown that in places like the Harney Basin, the quality and the quantity of the food here actually determines a lot about breeding success when these birds get to their breeding territory in the north,” Wicks said.

Water is a lifeforce in the Harney Basin and is something that concerns every landowner in the basin. Esther Lev is the executive director of [The Wetlands Conservancy](#) and a member of the HBWI. She is primarily concerned with the dynamic of the water, land and the humans and wildlife that rely on it. “Everyone responds to water,” she said. The Harney Basin really is a place where water manages everyone, she noted. Working with local ranchers to help ensure that water management decisions are made in a collaborative manner is a

cornerstone of her work with the HBWI. “We’re doing this together to collectively set a vision that we all want those wet meadows to stay, and we want flood irrigation to stay,” Lev said.

By concentrating on invasive carp management and addressing flood irrigation infrastructure, the members of the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative are creating positive working relationships with motivated partners and as a result, are encouraged by the progress made through collaborative projects.

*This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative.*

