



The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Has Strategic Approach To Solving Problems

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The [Natural Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\)](#), part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, has been helping America's private landowners and managers conserve their soil, water and other natural resources since 1935.

[Zola Ryan, District Conservationist](#) with the NRCS office in Hines, shares, the agency has a strategic approach to conservation. There are five areas of focus or priority in Harney County: aquatic health, Medusa head management, juniper encroachment, riparian condition and groundwater availability. These priorities are formulated through a local workgroup that meets annually. Private landowners, conservation groups, state and federal agencies and others offer input on what the priorities should be for the next five to 10 years. For each of the five priorities, NRCS creates a conservation implementation strategy, which is basically a detailed plan for a specific issue. "The implementation strategies then become internal funding proposals," Ryan said. "I submit that to my state office and say here's the priority in my long-range strategy and here's my implementation strategy for how we want to address it." The state can then allocate funds for the projects.

Ryan noted that sometimes there are other program funds available through the national office or national initiatives that the local NRCS can use rather than relying on Oregon's allocation for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, which is what funds most local projects.

Local funding opportunities

Ryan says the NRCS tries to look at the bigger picture when choosing which projects to initiate. "The hope is to focus on cumulative effects, so when we're done, we did more than just fix somebody's irrigation structures. The one project or effort improved spring staging habitat on 1,000 acres between these five properties that we worked on. We're trying to achieve cumulative benefits that are more meaningful," she said.

Some of the strategies the NRCS is working on in Harney County:

- Working lands for water bird habitat conservation
- Saving groundwater in Harney Basin using efficient irrigation technologies
- Stinkingwater Area Medusa head Management Plan
- Fire Prevention and Management in the Lone Pine Rangeland Fire Protection Association

These are funding opportunities that landowners who own or operate on land within the qualifying boundaries can apply for to obtain financial assistance from the NRCS. For more information about these projects and to see a map of which areas are involved, go to the [Oregon NRCS homepage](#) and scroll to the bottom of the page and click on the map.

A couple of the strategies overlap with collaborative objectives within the High Desert Partnership involving the [Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative's](#) goals surrounding flood irrigation and the [Harney County Wildfire Collaborative's](#) goals concerning wildfires.

While the local NRCS funds most of its projects through the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#), it also funds projects through the [Conservation Stewardship Program](#) and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. Through the Conservation Stewardship Program, the NRCS provides incentive payments to landowners for maintaining a good level of conservation stewardship as well as for adopting additional conservation measures.

The [Agricultural Conservation Easement Program](#) deals with both wetland and agricultural conservation easements. For wetland easements, the NRCS acts as the easement holder with the goal of restoring and protecting wetlands. For agricultural easements, the NRCS provides cost share to a land trust or other entity that would be the easement holder. These easements are intended to maintain agricultural uses on farm and ranch lands and prohibit conversion of the land to housing developments or energy developments.

Ryan noted that the NRCS in Harney County currently has 50 active contracts between the Environmental Quality Incentives and the Conservation Stewardship programs. They also have six perpetual wetland easements.

The process

The NRCS relies on landowners to initiate contact to get involved in a particular program. However, in some cases they send out direct mailings to property owners within a project area. For example, in the case of its flood irrigation program, the agency looked at aerial photography and satellite imagery overlaid with a tax map to identify places that appear to be flood irrigated. A large mailing was sent to those property owners to let them know a program is available.

Once a landowner contacts NRCS, they are put in contact with a staff person who will work with them to evaluate the project and develop a plan. In the case of flood irrigation projects, the landowner will meet with [Carlton Strough, a partner biologist](#) who works for the Harney Soil and Water Conservation District. He will visit the site and talk with the landowner about the issues they are having. For example, where flood irrigated fields are concerned, the NRCS is looking for opportunities to improve or secure the continued use of flood irrigation. Some issues might include old infrastructure, ditches that have not been maintained, culverts that have been squashed or culverts lacking a control structure. “There are definitely areas where it has become difficult to get water out onto portions of the fields even though the landowners have a water right. It’s the infrastructure itself that doesn’t work very well,” Ryan said. “The intent is to improve the infrastructure as best we can so that they can make the most effective use of the water that comes within their water right.”

In addition to maintaining flood irrigated fields, the NRCS is also concerned with improving habitat for Northern pintails that migrate in the spring. Ryan said that the NRCS is primarily focused on the Northern pintail because it is one of the first species to arrive during the spring migration. “If you have water early enough to provide habitat for pintails, you probably are going to have water in time to provide habitat for other species that show up a couple weeks later,” Ryan said.

When Strough meets with the landowners regarding their flood irrigated fields, there are certain parameters the NRCS would like to meet. Ideally, they would like to see anywhere from one to 18 inches of water on a field. They would like to see water across most of the field but not too deep. They would like to see a diversity of vegetation and a lumpy landscape, which provides structural complexity to meet different habitat needs.

Strough works with the landowner to define objectives that meet both the landowner’s and NRCS program goals. Strough then contacts the NRCS engineers to conduct site surveys and help develop plans to meet the objectives. Once everyone is satisfied with the plan, a contract is signed between the landowner and the NRCS. The landowner can then choose to do the work themselves or hire it out. Once the project is done to the specifications provided by the NRCS and

has been inspected and approved, the NRCS then provides funds to the landowner to help pay for the cost of the project.

Fixing culverts and other flood irrigation issues

Ryan said the NRCS has helped with several projects including pulling existing culverts that were in bad shape or the wrong size and replacing them with concrete water control structures or properly sized culverts. “We really try to look at safety and user-friendliness,” Ryan said of the projects. “Slightly greater investments result in structures that people will actively manage, rather than past projects that required swimming in a slough or risking falling off a structure into the water when they’re trying to put boards in.”

The NRCS has been involved in land shaping projects designed to slow the spread of water across a field. They’ve also helped install rock weir structures in ditches or streams to raise the elevation over time and make it easier for water to spread across the landscape. Ryan said they had one project where they helped reconstruct a ditch to reconnect it to a field. One project even involved some cross fencing to divide a field to give the landowner more flexibility in managing haying and grazing.

Ryan said that usually a landowner will come in with one problem that needs to be addressed. She noted that while the NRCS can usually help them with that one problem, there may be other issues that can be fixed along the way. “If there are a bunch of things that are bothering you and causing you problems, we might as well try to fix them all now if we can and if it’s within our budget and within your budget,” she said.

For more information about NRCS funding opportunities in Harney County, visit the [Oregon NRCS website](#) or call the local Hines office at 541-573-6446.

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

