



# The Quiet Work of Harney County Collaboratives

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The culture of Harney County has been described as “full contact citizenship” as people of this county put in time and effort every day to make Harney County a place we’re all proud to call home.

Our style of “full contact citizenship” is represented consistently through several collaborative efforts. Unless you’re directly involved or know someone who is, you may not even be aware of the important work these groups are doing in our community. That’s why we’re going to bring you information about the collaboratives with regular articles here in the Burns Times Herald. We want you to know that you, too, can become part of the process that is quietly impacting our land, our community and the economy in Harney County.

The Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative is one of these collaboratives. Where we live, the Harney Basin, is one of the great wonders of the west. Millions of birds use the Harney Basin as a rest stop on their migratory journey, both northbound and southbound on what is called the Pacific Flyway. They land here, rest and refuel using both land and water in all parts of the basin including the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and private lands. For waterfowl, the Harney Basin is like a central airport hub stopover. The opportunity for birds to rest and refuel here makes it possible for them to reach their breeding grounds in good physical condition, keeping their populations robust and resilient.

Outside of the refuge, private ranch lands provide critical support for this important bird migration. Traditional flood irrigation practices that spread shallow water across the Harney Basin’s hay meadows every spring create ideal conditions for migrating birds. These private working lands are one of the cornerstones of Harney County, supporting families and feeding our local economy. Landowners share and manage a wild, working landscape that sustains both people and wildlife; they have known for generations that the wellbeing of their private holdings affects those around

them, be it neighboring ranches or the migrating birds using their place as a rest stop.

*Pictured. Cow and geese sharing a Harney Basin wet meadow. Photo by Jeremy Hill.*

But the basin is under stress. Malheur Lake, the largest freshwater marsh in the west has been plagued with an over-population of invasive common carp. These non-native fish feed on and uproot the aquatic plants that once made Malheur Lake an immensely productive freshwater marsh for birds



and other wildlife. Adding to the decline of aquatic vegetation, powerful persistent winds at the lake (and throughout Harney County) make it difficult for aquatic plants to re-root or grow because the muddy water keeps sunlight from reaching them. And the problems are not just in the lake. Crumbling infrastructure and other forms of irrigation are making it increasingly difficult to sustain the traditional method of forage production through flood irrigation.

Pictured below: Malheur Lake. Photographed by Jeremy Hill.



Yet, there is hope. In 2005 High Desert Partnership was created to bring together different interest groups to collaborate and develop the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge's 15-year Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Once this plan was completed in 2013 the collaborative work didn't stop there; the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative, which involves many of the same people who participated in the development of the refuge conservation plan, began with a focus on improving aquatic health and maintaining wet meadow habitats throughout the watersheds for Harney and

Malheur Lakes and the streams and rivers that flow into them. Funded through a grant from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board's Focused Investment Partnership program, the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative's effort includes conducting research that will help guide decisions toward restoring Malheur Lake. It's also supporting landowners as they make infrastructure changes like upgrading their water management systems and adding and/or moving fencing to impact when and where their cattle graze.

Why does this all matter? Somewhat quietly, Harney County has made substantial effort to restore the natural ecosystems that provide the foundation for the local economy and is in the process of developing and implementing state of the art conservation strategies that will protect the environment. Harney County being a small, rural community has a powerful identity with the land, both public and private. How we care for this land reflects who we are. We want to be a reason birds can continue to use the basin to rest and refuel. We also want to be a reason ranchers and farmers in Harney County have the resources, in particular water, to keep their businesses healthy and contributing to our local economy for years to come.

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

