



# Program Offers Landowners Assistance with Ditch Cleanout

Funding for the program comes from Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative

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by Lauren Brown

Cleaning ditches is one of those tasks that seem tedious and time-consuming. It can easily fall by the wayside as other projects take precedence. However, in the

Harney Basin, ditches that are free of debris and vegetation can really help water get where it needs to be for the flood-irrigated wet meadows in the spring.

A recent pilot program has successfully helped local landowners clean ditches in 2024 and is looking for more applicants who would like assistance doing that in 2025.

Jason Kesling, the District Manager for Harney Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), said the pilot program received funding from the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative, a collaborative of the High Desert Partnership, which received legislative funds to help keep water flowing through the basin. This program does that by cleaning out ditches to move water through the system without impediment.

In drought years, this is important so that as many folks have access to as much of the water as possible, and in wet years it is imperative to move water off property in an efficient manner to prevent noxious grasses from taking over the wet meadows. "We have a problem of too little water or too much water in our basin, so we're trying to fine tune our irrigation canal systems to be able to deal with both of those issues," Kesling said.



There are a few different ways to clean out ditches. Kesling said much of the ditch cleaning up to this point has been done by excavator. However, they are also looking at conducting chemical clean outs to remove tules that can clog ditches. Burning ditches might also be an option. "We're looking for the most efficient way to do as much land as possible with the money we have allocated right now," he said. Harney SWCD is looking to make this a continual program that could be funded through the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board or legislatively through a water bill.

*Pictured: An excavator at work cleaning a ditch in the Harney Basin.*

The cost of cleaning the ditches ranges from \$1.10 per foot to \$3 per foot, depending on the chosen method. It also varies if material needs to be moved off site. "We're allowed to take up to 30 percent of the ditch site material without going through a permitting process," Kesling said. "If you're pulling that material and the landowner can't put it in the next field, it minimizes the efficiency of irrigation. That's when prices go up."

When a landowner applies for the program, Harney SWCD conducts a site visit, and the project goes out to bid. "The contractors get to look at the site and determine what they think the cost will be for them," Kesling said. He noted that they prefer the work to be contracted out and not done by the landowner. "The contractors have specific equipment to make sure that they make the ditches level. That doesn't preclude a landowner from bidding on the job as well, and they could be selected as a contractor, but they will need to comply with a contract agreement that, for example, requires the use of specialized land leveling equipment in order to be considered an eligible contractor," Kesling said.

Casey Shelman is the manager of the Bell-A Ranch, a co-op that involves 17 families. He has lived in the Harney Basin for most of his life and knows how crucial it is to get water out on the land when it is flowing in the spring. "We only have a short amount of time when we receive water here in the basin," he said. "There's about a 45- to 60-day period that you actually have enough water that you can spread it around."

He heard about the ditch cleanout program and decided it could potentially help improve the Bell-A Ranch's ability to flood irrigate about 6,800 acres in the Harney Valley. "We have no reservoir system, so we need to be able to get water moved around, and with ditches full of debris, there's no way to get that done," he said. The meadows, he said, essentially work as sponges and it is important to try to hang on to the water as long as you can.



*Pictured: A ditch in the Harney Basin before being cleaned.*

A site visit was made, the project was put out to bid and work began this fall. Contractors have been working on the ditches, which involved replacing three culverts. They were scheduled to be finished by Nov. 30. "We'll see in the spring. There will have to be some maintenance with some weed control. We'll be responsible for that," Shelman said.



Kesling noted that they have the budget to accommodate more applicants and would like to be able to have more projects lined up in the queue to keep the program going. The program has been advertised on the radio and written about in the newspaper, but Kesling said that word of mouth between landowners is what he believes will further the program along, especially now that some projects have been successfully completed.

*Pictured: A ditch in the Harney Basin after being cleaned of plants and debris.*

Shelman said that the people with Harney SWCD and the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative have been good to work with and integral to getting the work done. "It's nice being in a rural area where everybody knows each other, and we're able to work together to do good things," Shelman said.

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

