



Wetlands Collaborative Works with Local Landowner to Improve Wet Meadow Near Burns

Improvements include channel maintenance and fixes to water diversion structure to add safety and control

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by Lauren Brown

In 2023, the High Desert Partnership's Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative received an infusion of funding when the Oregon legislature gave it \$2.5 million to fund wetlands restoration projects. Over the last two years a number of these projects have been completed. They involved bird habitat studies, plant management projects, ditch maintenance, and water diversion improvements among others. All the projects have the goal of benefiting migratory and resident bird populations as well as assisting landowners with water management.



One such project, which was completed in August 2024, was the Rickman Wet Meadows Project. A couple of years prior to 2023, Steve Rickman contacted the Natural Resources Conservation Service and Harney Soil & Water Conservation District (HSWCD) regarding improvements to the wet meadows on his property. They conducted a site visit and completed the preliminary project work so that the project was waiting in the wings when the legislative dollars came along to fund it. "It was a project that we were trying to get funded through other sources," Jason Kesling, District Manager with HSWCD. "When the High Desert Partnership was able to secure that \$2.5 million, this project jumped out as a shovel ready project. It was ready to go. It just needed money."

The project is located east of Highway 78 by the airport outside of Burns and furthers the collaborative's goals of working with landowners to better irrigate the wet meadows for both economic and ecological purposes. It also aligns with the collaborative's vision and intention to maintain an abundant, diverse and resilient wetland ecosystem in the face of climatic and man-made influences to enable a strong natural resource-based economy.

The project broke ground during the summer of 2024 and was completed in August of that year. "We redid the boards and the

walkway on the diversion dam, and then we installed 200 feet of culvert because the ditch was washing away," Kesling said.

To convey water to part of the field that wasn't getting wet, they created an internal lateral ditch to distribute water more efficiently. The project involved three new water control structures as well as water conveyance and maintenance.



The spring of 2025 was a wet one for the Harney Basin, with snow melt causing flooding and damage in Burns. Rickman said the project's improvements made controlling the water easier. "As wet as it was, we sure could have had a problem where they put that pipe in, and that was all fantastic there. No problems. We could put the water where we needed it when we needed it," he said. "When we get a shorter water year, then we'll know how it all really worked. This year was so wet that you didn't have to worry about it much. Everything got wet. It was easy."

Kesling added that the improved irrigation infrastructure also likely helped Rickman secure his ditch, helping to prevent washout from flooding during the high water year. "When we had all that water, he was able to actually walk out there and manage the boards because it is a lot safer out there for him," he said.

In addition to contributing to the resource-based economy associated with flooded habitat for waterbirds, the project was in what the collaborative considers a priority area. "It expanded the footprint of the wetland area, so we created more habitat for waterfowl," Kesling said. Because it was shovel-ready and engineer-reviewed, it was basically designed and ready to implement, which made it a slam dunk for funding through the legislative

dollars.

In the end, at a cost of about \$35,000, the project helped improve 101 acres of flooded wet meadow habitat and provided landowner Rickman with more safety and control over the water.

"When we get where we can control it and handle the water better, it's a win for everybody: the wildlife, agriculture, and the land itself," Rickman said. "If you don't have things washing out and everything works like it's supposed to, you don't get the erosion. You control what you do. From my perspective, it's a win for everything and everybody involved."

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

