



Irrigation Infrastructure Emergency Repair Program Now Available

Harney Soil & Water Conservation District and Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative find funding to help fix flood irrigation infrastructure

May 2025, by Lauren Brown

A program created to help landowners with irrigation infrastructure improvements serves as a timely response to the recent spring flooding throughout Harney County.

Jason Kesling, the District Manager for Harney Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD), said the idea came about when there were some cost savings from an irrigation project funded through a legislative bill awarded to the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative. The SWCD approached the High Desert Partnership to see if it was possible to reallocate that money into an emergency fund to help irrigators either size up their culverts



or repair roads or dikes that were damaged in the recent flooding. Kesling said they presented the idea to the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative, which operates under the High Desert Partnership umbrella, and the collaborative agreed that it would be a great use of that funding.

Pictured: Flooded meadows March 2025, by Brandon McMullen

As a result, the Emergency Flood Infrastructure Restoration (EFIR) program was created. Because of how the money was originally appropriated through the legislature, the funding is very specific to projects that involve flood damage to irrigation infrastructure or flood damage that affects how an irrigation system works.

The SWCD has a budget of \$132,638 for the EFIR program and will accept applications through May 16 from landowners who believe they qualify for funding. "We've been getting a lot of interest in this," Kesling said, noting that they have received 17 applications so far.

After receiving all applications, a joint committee consisting of SWCD employees and Ducks Unlimited staff will evaluate and prioritize projects based on urgency. These projects may include culvert enlargements, road repairs, dike repairs, and fixes for compromised ditches. According to Kesling, "The committee will be tasked with determining whether this is a viable irrigation issue." The highest priority will go to projects where failure to address the problem would directly impact agricultural productivity. As Kesling explained, "If the landowner doesn't address the issue, what is the impact to irrigation and/or agricultural production from irrigation? For example, a clearly identified problem might involve not getting a crop if they don't fix this issue. Those projects would rank the highest."

Kesling said it will be similar to how the Oregon Water Enhancement Board determines funding for projects. “We’ll rank them and put the funding line at \$132,638. We’ll fund the ones above the line, and we’ll not fund the ones below the line,” he said. “But we’ll contact and reach out to those landowners and see if we can find additional resources to address their concerns.”

The SWCD has publicized the application process through its website and on Facebook, and the High Desert Partnership has also advertised the EFIR program to let landowners know funding for irrigation repairs is available. However, much of the publicity has been through word of mouth. “We already work with a lot of landowners and producers,” Kesling said. Even so, this program has drummed up interest from new folks the SWCD hasn’t worked with before. The opportunity to work with more landowners and producers is promising, and Kesling noted that even if some of the applicants don’t receive funding through the emergency program, the SWCD may be able to fund the projects through other funding streams. “What I see happening is that we are building a bigger clientele of producers who can get improvements on irrigation,” he said.

Kesling said the SWCD wants to be very up front about how projects will be prioritized for these funds. “We need to make sure that this ties to irrigation,” he said. However, they don’t want to discourage landowners from applying as there may be other ways of funding projects that don’t rank as an immediate priority. “We still want people putting in applications, even if they wouldn’t potentially rank for funding through this program,” he said.

After the window for applications closes, Kesling and Braden Morris, a SONEC partner biologist with SWCD, will examine each application in the field and write up proposals for what is needed to address the issues for each application. They will also be taking into account the water status of each area. “Some areas look like they’re easier to access and others are still pretty saturated and might be difficult to access,” Kesling said. “We want to make sure we rank the entire county against itself, so we’re not prioritizing one flooded area over another.”

He hopes to have the project proposals completed and evaluated by the end of June so that projects can begin in July.

Kesling noted that this is a new program, and details are being ironed out as they happen. “We’re making it as transparent as possible, so everybody understands why we did what we did,” he said. “We’re learning by doing, and we’re refining and we’re trying to make the biggest impact with the amount of money we’ve got.”

For more information about the Emergency Flood Infrastructure Restoration (EFIR) application process, visit the SWCD website at harneyswcd.org, contact Braden Morris at morris@harneyswcd.net or call the SWCD office at 541-573-6446 ext. 4.

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

