United States Department of Agriculture
NRCS Natural Resources Conservation Service

OREGON Conservation showcase

McFetridge Family: *(left to right) Jay, Stephanie Jones, Merlie, granddaughter Myranda, Darryl and grandson Trevor.*

Grassroots Idea Becomes Conservation Reality

Enterprise, Ore.—Merlie McFetridge serves lunch to her family and farmhands at the stroke of noon every day. "If you're late, you may not eat," says her son Jay who manages the farm for the family. Everyone gathers 'round the large table in the sunny dining room for a substantial meal to fuel an afternoon of strenuous work in the fields. After his dessert of chocolate cake and ice cream, Jay pushes back from the table and returns to putting up hay. The crew follows. The tradition of farm life for the McFetridge family is as strong as their legacy of conservation.

Jay's father, Darryl McFetridge, has served as vice chair of the Associated Ditch Company for more than two decades. The organization manages the water use and distribution from Wallowa Lake in Eastern Oregon. Jay is emerging as a conservation leader in his own right. He formulated and found support for the idea of converting two miles of open ditches to pressurized pipeline, ultimately reducing sediment and nutrients in the upper Wallowa River.

Jay's grassroots concept was put forward to USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) by application from Wallowa Soil and Water Conservation District and awarded cost share funding as the Prairie Creek Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI). NRCS District Conservationist, Tom Smith, has high praise for Jay and his proactive approach to a focused conservation effort, "Jay brought the idea to NRCS and it was a perfect match for the natural resource issues of the area."

Tom noted the importance of the project became apparent during a couple of years when ditch flows were not sufficient to allow everyone to operate the

Wallowa River Basin: *Oregon's Little Switzerland*

entire season, "The landowners have learned from the past they have to have a better handle on the management of the water from the lake. It is hard for managers to regulate the system. With these projects we hope to make the delivery system more efficient." Darryl has seen a big change in the use of water as farms in the Wallowa River Basin have converted from flood to sprinkler irrigation. "When I grew up everyone was flooding. Sometimes this practice would use so much water that Wallowa Lake would be dry in the fall." Darryl says now that local growers have found better ways to use less water for farming, the lake is rarely drawn down.

Wallowa Lake was originally created in the early 1900s to provide a source of irrigation water which transformed the land from dessert to prime farmland. Jay reflects on the process of working with NRCS to accomplish his conservation goal: "It's been easy. I threw the idea at Tom and we sat down and talked about it. Tom took a hold of the project and ran with it. He is very accessible and very receptive to new ideas. Tom is always there." Jay appreciates that he will be informed if a project may not work or if it is not a good match for NRCS. Jay says, "They are open to listening to concerns in the design, and give an explanation of the design."

While some may think applying for a USDA program means a pile of paperwork, Jay had a positive experience. "It is mainly reading the rules and regulations. There are only a couple of pages that need to be completed. The paperwork is really minimal."

The Prairie Creek CCPI project is just the start of many similar projects that could be completed in Prairie Creek. Tom wants this project to demonstrate the potential

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water savings, energy savings and management improvements that could help watershed conditions in Prairie Creek and the Wallowa River Basin. "Our short-term expectation was to demonstrate the idea, get others talking, observing and thinking about how such an improvement might help them." That goal has been met.

The long-term goal is to get more of these projects implemented. NRCS is currently conducting investigations to locate the various ditches and pumps in Prairie Creek. With that information, NRCS can estimate the potential number of projects, start working with landowners and doing more projects. Tom says, "My goal is to get 75 percent of the ditches used for irrigation in Prairie Creek to be directly diverted from the five main canals serving the valley." Just as Merlie McFetridge will continue to prepare and serve meals on her farm each day, Tom and NRCS will continue to nourish the legacies of conservation of the many farmers and ranchers in the Wallowa River Basin.

NRCS
Helping People Help the Land

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Prairie Creek: ***A more constant flow level in Prairie Creek will reduce stream bank erosion.***