

Lewiston Orchards Water Exchange & Title Transfer Project

[chime]

Shannon: It's about the water. Tribal and non-tribal alike, is that we want to share a resource and we want to rebuild a resource. We want that resource to thrive.

[music]

NARRATOR: Cradled between the Snake and Clearwater Rivers in Northern Idaho lies a multicultural community and cherished ecology. The Nez Perce Tribe, residents of Lewiston Orchards, and native fish, including threatened Snake River Steelhead, currently share the cold water that descends from Craig Mountain in what is known as the Lewiston Orchards Project.

A complex series of dams, pipes, and canals are used to collect and store water on Craig Mountain. The water is directed through U.S. and Nez Perce Tribal Territory to Sweetwater Diversion Dam, then diverted at strategic periods into the 11-mile Sweetwater Canal, which supplies the water to fill Reservoir A, or Mann Lake as it is known locally. Finally, it gets piped into the Lewiston Orchards Irrigation District for use by the patrons of this community in south Lewiston.

Lanie: This watershed is overtaxed. There isn't always enough water to meet the needs of people and fish. We needed to find a long-term solution.

NARRATOR: With the leadership of Lewiston resident Jerry Klemm, The Nez Perce Tribe, local community, and federal partners have developed a collaborative approach and comprehensive solution, known as the Lewiston Orchards Water Exchange and Title Transfer Project, to solve the local water problems.

[lawn sprinkler]

Dave Johnson: The idea of the project really is intended to meet three primary goals. It's to provide a constant, more stable source of water for the Lewiston Orchards Irrigation District. It is meant to ensure that we have water for listed steelhead, and also is done to right some of the wrongs that were done to the Nez Perce people in taking of lands many years ago.

NARRATOR: To meet these goals, a series of deep groundwater wells are being drilled to provide a new source of water for the Irrigation District, allowing for the cold clean flows from Craig Mountain to remain instream for ESA-listed Steelhead and resident fish.

[music]

Barney: The concept is a bucket-for-bucket exchange. As we are able to bring water out of the ground, we will replace that water that we're taking out of the stream.

[creek flows]

In the beginning of this, the Nez Perce Tribe's on one side fighting for every drop for the fish. The irrigation districts on the other side, fighting for every drop for our patrons. And now, we truly are all working for each other's benefits at this point to make sure that we come up with a solution that, for our community, will be here for hundreds of years.

[creek flows]

[music]

Shannon: In the early 1900s, living the American dream, people were wanting to claim riches of this vast land.

Barney: The Farmers, they were kind of trying to figure out what they wanted to grow here and of course, you know, now we do dryland farming and you can see in the background you can see the wheat that's growing around us and doesn't require irrigated croplands, but they kicked around the idea of growing lettuce, which is a water-intensive crop. That never panned out. They come to find out that this climate in this region, and with the water available that we could really grow fruit

Emmit: They wanted to turn the Lewiston orchard into this great produce-producing area. You know, their idea was to take water from Craig Mountain. But in order to do that, they had to go through Indian lands to do it.

NARRATOR: Within this watershed lies a unique feature—Sweetwater Springs. The cold, clean, and reliable source of water is important to the Nez Perce People and to ESA-threatened Steelhead.

[creek flows]

Barney: Lake Waha, which is a portion of our system, it captures water off of Craig Mountain. There's no natural surface outlet. The water percolates down through an old, ancient landslide,

Emmit: It takes three months for the water to go from the bottom of the lake into Sweetwater Springs. It comes out of Sweetwater Springs at a constant 50 degrees all year long, in June, July, August, when the fish need it the most.

Dave: So this large source of constant cool water made Sweetwater Creek a very important place. Not only for Nez Perce, but other tribes used to travel here to enjoy the waters provided in Sweetwater.

[music]

NARRATOR: The early private ventures that built the original infrastructure diverted much of these flows that provided critical fish habitat and were spiritually important to the Nez Perce people in order to irrigate the arid land. Seeing agriculture success, they added additional infrastructure, including Soldiers Meadow Dam, Captain John Diversion, Webb Creek Diversion, and finally, West Fork Diversion to utilize Lake Waha for additional storage and send flows downstream to provide more reliable irrigation water.

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In the 1940s, the Bureau of Reclamation was asked to take ownership of the project by the local community through legislative action to improve the then aging system. Reclamation repaired, improved, and rebuilt the infrastructure to deliver water to the agricultural community.

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This growing system led to increased diversions for irrigation, leaving little water for resident fish, ESA-Listed Steelhead, and other anadromous fish.

Megan: Snake River steelhead are anadromous fish, which means they spawn here in creeks and tributaries, and then travel out to the ocean, live there in the ocean, and then come back here to their native waters to spawn and start the cycle over.

Shannon: Héeyey is our native name for steelhead. The Héeyey, the steelhead, Nazóg, the salmon, Piickatyo, the trout, those have played such a major role in our lives, in our culture throughout time that they're a piece of us.

[water splashing]

Shannon: Looking back as a child, I swam right here in this swimming hole. One day we'd be swimming in the water, the next day it would be like, "Where's all our water at?" And at that time they'd be diverting the water.

[creek flows]

Emmit: I've lived here my whole life. My parents have lived here, my grandparents. My grandmother said that there were tribes from all over the area that would come to visit Sweetwater Creek, because it had a special power to it. My great aunt, Mary Painter, talked about they could use a gunny sack to go and just dip steelhead out of Webb Creek, fishing all the time. That doesn't happen anymore because the population is so depressed. If we lose these species, you lose that part of our culture, pretty quick, the culture will be gone.

[music]

NARRATOR: Over time, water use within Lewiston Orchards has changed. The growing trend of urbanization has held true for this northern Idaho community.

Barney: As time goes on, agriculture changed and we quit growing orchards. We got less and less orchards. Now we grow houses and we grow people.

[music]

It still has an agriculture feel to the community up here. There's many people that have a hobby farm. They might have some chickens, or a goat, or sheep, or even a cow that they're raising.

NARRATOR: The area has also been affected by changing hydrologic conditions in the West.

[lawn sprinkler]

Barney: We've had to deal with water restrictions and water rationing for the patrons for decades. The fire protection system for Lewiston Orchards is based off of that irrigation water as well. So, you can't run out of water. You can't turn the dam off.

[music]

Dave Johnson: The catalyst for getting this in place was a fight. Sweetwater Creek went dry. So did Webb Creek. Steelhead need clean cold water. They are listed under the Endangered Species Act. You can't have its water source go dry, so we did litigate on that.

David Redhorse: The tribe was pursuing the increase of the stream flows to protect the fish as well as resolve some of the land issues surrounding this project.

Emmit: We actually took them to court and we won.

Lanie: To meet ESA needs, the district has to maintain minimum flows for fish and fish habitat. With already limited supply and patrons regularly facing water restrictions, this really isn't a long-term viable operation for the project.

Dave: They were facing some pretty troubling future. Change was a coming.

[music]

Megan: It was Jerry Klemm, a local community leader that initiated the groups getting together to find a comprehensive solution.

Jerry: We had a year of water shortage in the system. It got pretty bad. And so I wrote a letter to the editor a few weeks after that. It kind of stuck in me and I says, "I got to say something," so I did.

NARRATOR: This community leader wrote a letter to the editor criticizing the lack of a long-term solution to meet the needs of fish and people alike.

Barney: Jerry also is a person that believes, if you're going to have complaints, you can't just sit on the sidelines and make those complaints. You've got to step up to the plate and try to be a part of the solution.

NARRATOR: Jerry set out to bring people together to solve the region's water supply problems. His long-standing experience and reputation in the community allowed him to approach different parties to talk about replacing conflict with collaboration.

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Jerry: Lower Clearwater Exchange Project is a coalition of folks that I put together to have a meeting to see if we could get together on our views, collaboratively, to solve some issues between the Nez Perce tribe and the surrounding agencies and folks that are interested in that particular area. After meeting with each one of them individually, we had a consensus that we'd have a first meeting. The first meeting was in June of 2008. Things went well, and so I planned on the second meeting.

NARRATOR: The Lower Clearwater Exchange Project brought together the Nez Perce Tribe, Lewiston Orchards Irrigation District, City of Lewiston, Nez Perce County, and Lewis Clark Valley Chamber of Commerce as a unified team.

Dave Johnson: You know, we've had a really good relationship the last several years with them. I think all our ideas and goals are aligned.

Lanie: I'm thankful for the foundation of trust we've been able to build working together.

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NARRATOR: The Lower Clearwater Exchange Project partners, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs looked at different options to increase water supply.

Barney: The four solutions came out it was do nothing, status quo, continue to do what we were doing, a pumping station out of the clear water, pumping station out of the Snake River, or a well field.

[wind] [explosion]

Megan: The well field was selected as the preferred alternative because we were able to construct and realize results during construction of the project, whereas had we chosen another project, we wouldn't see the results of the project until full completion.

David: The tribes wanted to almost immediately increase the flows of these creeks and streams. This was a great opportunity to gain that.

Megan: The pilot well was constructed in 2017 to test the capability of the deep regional aquifer. We saw the results, and it proved to be able to provide the water we were hoping it would.

NARRATOR: A massive specialized drill chewed through layers of earth and hard basalt to descend 1900 feet, past the shallow aquifer, all the way down to the deep regional aquifer.

Barney: When we went out to bid, we come to find out that there's only two drillers in the Pacific Northwest that actually had the machinery and the capability to drill a hole this big and this deep. It was huge and massive. The drill bit itself was taller than me. It had three drilling heads to it.

NARRATOR: The pilot well was constructed near the Snake River, which recharges the deep regional aquifer. The water is pumped up and transported to the patrons of the Irrigation District, and during periods of low water usage, the excess supply will be pumped east to fill Reservoir A as

a buffer during periods of heavy usage. Additional wells will be constructed to provide enough water for the district.

Lanie: After the wellfield is in full production, the district patrons won't be dependent on the surface water system and the Title Transfer can begin. Reclamation intends to transfer the components of the Lewiston Orchards Project from Reservoir A Dam upstream to BIA to be held in trust for the Nez Perce Tribe.

David: The Bureau of Indian Affairs is right now observing the process to carry out the responsibilities to protect and conserve trust assets of the Nez Perce tribe. In the process of acquiring the reservoirs and the lakes, the tribes, they're also cooperating with the irrigation district to Mann Lake for storage.

Lanie: And the infrastructure downstream from Reservoir A Dam will be transferred to the Lewiston Orchards Irrigation District to continue servicing their patrons. At this point, the Lewiston Orchards Project will no longer be a Reclamation project.

[music]

Barney: It's been pretty amazing watching the community come together.

Emmit: This has been going on a long time. I'm just so happy that we are where we're at today and that progress is being made.

Jerry: Today, we got a well-oiled machine. I'm really proud of the way the people are going together on this. It's really good.

Lanie: Reclamation is proud to support a team that's finding a way to adaptively manage water locally rather than in the courts. Everybody brings their A game. We have a shared view, we're putting in the sweat, and we can see where it will go.

Dave: It's a great example of people finding a solution and one that really does satisfy all of our needs.