

RECLAMATION

Managing Water in the West

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Reclamation

Fossil Find at American Falls

[music]

Casey Dooks: It's tricky. It's a tricky site.

[music]

Sean Hess: We got a call that there were either mammoth or mastodon remains that were found on American Falls Reservoir, and so we're out here to try to do an emergency recovery.

[music]

Roland Springer: Well this August we had a whole lot of rainfall and the irrigation districts couldn't find uses for their water. The farmers weren't using it. So they sent a lot more down these drainage ways back into the reservoir. And what do you know? It dug down into the place where there was this fossil.

Mary Thompson: The fact that we found this close to water is both a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing in the fact that the water probably exposed it. It's a curse because it's also eroding and breaking up the skull itself and the tusks, which were very fragile and washing them away.

[water rushing]

Mary: So we got this very short window of time to get in here, get this out, and preserve it for future generations. They're removing what we would call the "overburden" which is all the sediments that are on top of it and trying to figure out the extent of the bone.

Casey: So in the beginning we have some tusks that was protruding out, and then we uncovered a fairly complete skull of a mammoth. We started finding more of what looks like might be part of that same animal coming out of there.

Mary: It's a very unique find. The skulls are extremely fragile. Tusks are even rarer. As soon as the tusk is exposed it really starts to flake and fall apart. A lot of the real work is going to start when we get it out of the ground and back to the museum. For every hour we spend out here, that's another 10 to 20 hours back in the lab. And then we can tie it into the other finds that we have all over the reservoir and then really reconstruct how it interacted with the land, with the other animals, and what Idaho looked like thousands of years ago and even push it back farther to millions of years ago.

[music]

Casey: I mean, this is an animal that lived in a totally different world that we might like to think we can imagine, but how do we imagine something 72,000 years ago or even older than that? It's really just kind of mind boggling, and it's fascinating.

Sean: In a lot of ways, this whole area was a lot more like Africa than the Idaho that we know today. There's been a lot of change through time. And without the past, without understanding that, we have a much harder time understanding what our future might be.

Roland: There are laws in relation to preserving fossils and specimens and the other things that we find. All the items that are found around here, these are on federal government property and it is property of the people of the United States. So we take these finds very seriously and we want to preserve them.

Mary: If the public finds something, their best recourse is to mark the location and notify the Bureau of Reclamation.

Sean: Use your cell phone. Take a photograph of it. A lot of cells have got GPS locational ability in them right now. Take your photo, e-mail it to the Bureau of Reclamation, and we'll make sure it gets to the right folks

Roland: The one thing they should not do is go and collect these fossils and take them home and make them their own for personal use.

Sean: The scientific value of those specimens is so high that we really need to make sure that they get into the hands of the right researchers who can interpret these things, help us understand their significance.

[music]