



“Impossible” river project defying the odds

Plan to restore flows to 12 miles of Big Wood River gaining support
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By Greg Stahl

A plan to restore water flows to lower sections of the Big Wood River is gaining momentum.

A major effort to restore consistent flows to a 12-mile stretch of the Big Wood River south of Bellevue is progressing beyond initial expectations, according to the project's director.

The undertaking, known as the Wood River Legacy Project, relies on providing water rights holders with an option to keep some of their water in-stream. The measure would boost the health of the fishery, provide an economic boost to the south valley, and benefit farmers and ranchers, contends Rich McIntyre, the project's director.

So far, the Big Wood Canal Co. and commissioners from three counties agree.

On Tuesday, Blaine County joined Lincoln and Jerome counties and the Big Wood Canal Co. by offering its conceptual support for the project. Minidoka and Gooding counties are expected to offer their support soon, McIntyre said.

Meetings with the Northside Canal Co., which covers the Little Wood River basin, and the AB Irrigation District, which is based in Minidoka County, are expected to occur in the next couple weeks.

McIntyre added that snaring initial support from the southern, farming-centric stretches of the Big and Little Wood basins was key.

"If we heard it once, we heard it a thousand times: You'll never get Republican support, you'll never (form) a bipartisan coalition, you'll never be able to change Idaho water law," McIntyre said. "Now we have Republican support, we've formed a bipartisan coalition, and we have a lot of support from down-basin."

McIntyre said creating a solid foundation of political support would be "the most difficult and challenging" aspect of the project.

"The project politically has come together much, much faster than we ever thought it would," McIntyre said. "People are quite surprised it came together this way."

The Big Wood River is one of the most prized trout fisheries in the state, but about a third of it runs dry for half the year. In 1920, the river below Bellevue was completely diverted into irrigation ditches—a practice that continues today.

McIntyre said hundreds, perhaps thousands, of trout died last month when the Big Wood River was once again closed off to flows downstream from Bellevue.

"The stench was incredible, and the visual of the dry river channel with kids trying to pick up flopping, dying fish was powerful."

Idaho's long-entrenched water laws currently force water right holders to take all of their allotted water, or none at all, a policy known as "use it or lose it."

As a result, some people—especially those who no longer rely on water to irrigate crops—are forced to use more water than they need, and the valuable commodity becomes even more fleeting down-basin. If the project eventually passed the Idaho Legislature, it would give water users an option to keep some of it in-stream.

"This project will provide an option," McIntyre told Blaine County commissioners on Tuesday. "We've made this as simple as possible. We want it to be clean and simple—a win-win project for everybody."

While McIntyre is an avid angler, he contends his plan is not designed solely for the benefit of anglers.

"There is an understandable lack of local understanding regarding the effects of our local water use on—and connection to—lower-basin residents," McIntyre wrote in a letter to the Blaine County Commission. "In addition to providing more water down basin, it is the hope of the Legacy Project board that the project can help re-establish communication and basin community links that have frayed in the last few decades."

Carl Pendleton, a rancher from Lincoln County, said the project will benefit down-basin water users, whose water struggles have intensified over the last decade.

Pendleton said it used to be that one out of every 10 years was a short water year. Now, water seems to be running low every three to five years, he said.

"I urge you to support this project," Pendleton told the Blaine County Commission on Tuesday.

Jim Walker, who owns a gravel operation in the southern Wood River Valley, expressed concern that the project would seek to shut down his business and others in the industrial area south of Bellevue.

"Read their Web site. They don't like mining, logging, flood control. They don't like dams," Walker said, referring to Idaho Rivers United, which is one of the project's major sponsors. "It seems to me you better look at the whole picture here, where they're going with it."

McIntyre told Walker and the commissioners that the stretch of river adjacent to Walker's operation may undergo restoration work, conducted by the Wood River Land Trust, but that he has no intention of shutting down or negatively impacting business in the area.

"I do support this conceptually," Commissioner Tom Bowman said. "But we'll have to wait to see the details to make sure there is no harm" to local businesses or water users.

McIntyre said he will continue to collect support, both politically and financially, over the next few months. Legislatures from southern Idaho need to understand the project and how it could benefit the rest of the state, he added.

The project, which is relying on donations, is budgeted at \$291,000, half of which will be used to fund a comprehensive study of the area's hydrological anatomy.

"These studies are expensive but critical to forwarding our knowledge of basin hydrology," McIntyre wrote. "The design and results of the studies will be shared with all project participants as well as The Nature Conservancy, Wood River Land Trust, the Idaho Department of Water Resources and (U.S. Geological Survey) ... to insure the proposed studies address existing lower valley hydrology information gaps as well as project results."