

Lacomb Irrigation District Fish Screen Nets Acclaim

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LACOMB — Lacomb Irrigation District staff and volunteers celebrated the installation last month of an innovative new fish screen, the first of its kind west of the Cascades.

The new screen spits out irrigation water without a hitch, it won't kill fish and it delivers a continuous stream of trouble-free water to a hydroelectric plant downstream that supplies enough power for 1,000 houses on the Pacific Power grid.

The horizontal fish screen on Crabtree Creek near Lacomb is one of just eight in Oregon and Montana. But its benefits to the pocketbook and to fish have caught the eyes of farmers and fishers at another 20 potential sites in Washington and California.

At a July 25 celebration and tour of the new screen installation, Scott Bruslind, one of four part-time district employees who work for the elected five-member board, said it wasn't easy for Lacomb folks to let go of the old irrigation set-up with its bucolic metal rotary drum, paddle wheel and settling ponds.

But the old-fashioned system clogged regularly with leaves, requiring staff to halt irrigation for days, haul the heavy parts out of the water, and clean or repair them. The grand water wheel that flipped through the water was worn out, its chains were breaking, and it was responsible for passing fish and eggs into the irrigation lines. The system was going to require expensive repairs, so the board began looking at something entirely new.

“We were pumping fish into fields like you see in those lottery TV ads. We had to fix this,” Bruslind said.

In 2005, the Lacomb district turned to an innovative company that had just been formed by an irrigation district in Hood River County faced with similar needs to update and meet environmental standards. That district patented its new fish screen and sold it through the nonprofit organization Farmers Conservation Alliance, whose broad mission is to benefit “farmers, fish and families,” according to director Les Perkins.

An added bonus for the Lacomb Irrigation District is that the screen has no moving parts to break or maintain. Because it is horizontal and the current sweeps it clean, there's no place for leaves and debris to clog it. Generally, it is self-cleaning, according to Perkins.

The screen wasn't cheap, and it took some time to install. It cost \$712,000, but several agencies pitched in: \$161,000 came from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, \$73,000 came from the U.S. Natural Resource Conservation Service, \$50,000 came from the Fish American Foundation and \$12,000 came from U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

“The rest came from our pockets,” said Dean Castle, chairman of the board and one of the district’s 292 irrigators. Castle was a Lebanon High School teacher and coach before he retired to his 10 acres in the Lacombe area.

Castle said the board’s portion of the new screen came from money raised in the sale of power and irrigation fees. Those fees are the lowest in the state, he said, at \$10 a year per acre, because they are offset by power generation income. The fees are drawn from the district’s 2,400 acres where berries, grass seed, corn and Christmas trees are common crops.

The celebration of the new screen was sort of a new beginning for a historic district, according to Clark Griffith, one of two district staff who call themselves “ditch walkers.” Griffith’s father-in-law, Auldy Ayers, was a founding member of the district in 1935. Ayers was secretary/treasurer of the board in those days, long before Clark married Auldy’s daughter, Anne.

Today Griffith, retired and settled on a piece of the family homestead, walks the irrigation ditches that snake out from the new screen, and keeps them clear.

“My job is to fight with the beavers and keep them out of the ditches,” Clark said, laughing.

How it works

The Farmers Screen works like this: Water diverted from Crabtree Creek’s main channel flows over a flat, horizontal screen, carrying fish, sticks and leaves to Crabtree Creek. Meanwhile, inside the walls of the screen, some of the water drops down, flows over an adjacent weir wall and into a flume. The diverted and fish-free water can then be piped downhill for irrigation or power.

Les Perkins, director of Farmers Conservation Alliance, said the Lacombe screen is one of the larger ones, but smaller projects are also possible. Dozens of other projects are under way in Montana, California and Washington farms and districts.

For more information about the screens, visit www.farmersscreen.org. Or call Perkins, (541) 716-6085.