

52 Faces – Mike Kleinsmith of Farmers Irrigation District

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An irrigation district that spans the lower Hood River Valley has a new director.

The Farmers Irrigation District board chose Mike Kleinsmith, 43, to head its operations last month. The longtime Hood River resident is well-suited to the task.

Kleinsmith has worked at the district since 1994 when he began as a project contractor building a flume. He remembers taking the job along with his brother, Dan, and “learning ever since then.”



Farmers Irrigation District has a long history in Hood River County. Its origins go back to 1874 when the Water Supply Company of Hood River Valley was formed to irrigate about 1,000 acres of land. It became the Hood River Irrigation District in 1905. The Farmers Irrigation District formed in 1906. After many years of discussing the idea, the neighboring districts merged into one.

Today Farmers Irrigation District provides water to 5,800 acres and 1,722 users. Its operations go beyond just providing water for residential and agriculture uses. The district also produces hydropower for sale to PacificCorp, something that Kleinsmith foresees will continue bringing the district \$2 million a year in revenue once a new 20-year power sales agreement is secured.

During his time at the district, Kleinsmith has had to deal with rebuilding from two separate flood events that damaged the district’s infrastructure. While the Nov. 2006 debris torrent may come more readily to mind, the district had already been through some of the same issues a decade earlier.

“The ’96 flood wiped out low-line canal and upper district diversions,” Kleinsmith said.

He explained that the district used to erect structures similar to walls to divert water. After those were toppled in 1996, the district began installing an invention of its own.

“That is when we began building flatplate screens,” he said.

While the district still holds the patent for the innovative discovery, the Farmers Conservation Alliance began producing and selling the items to districts beyond Hood River.

“We’re focused (now) on a better, more friendly way to divert water,” he said.

Kleinsmith referred to the fact that the screens are better for fish migrating through the river.

By the time 2006 rolled around, Kleinsmith was still working in the field but had assumed more administrative and managerial duties. He was the systems supervisor and acting manager for the district, for which he oversaw all the irrigation projects.

“But I also knew I kind of wanted to have more to do with the decision-making process,” he said. “But there are so many different things to do here; I really enjoy the diversity.”

He said that included a mix of projects from working with helicopters, on irrigation projects, to conferences and work preparing the district for the future.

A major project that he helped complete was the repair work in summer of 2007 to rebuild the district’s main canal and lots of paperwork plus to recoup the cost for the district. The entire cost of damages to the district was \$2.3 million.

For the future, Kleinsmith has high hopes including a number of projects he is working on with the five-member board of directors.

He wants to strive to bring the district back to being a more rounded irrigation water provider, including finishing pressurizing the system instead of using open ditches. Current work is being done along Tucker Road, Country Club Road and Markham Road.

Other goals include a number of pressure pipe projects; enclosing all of the large conveyance canals in pipe; converting orchards to pressure-compensating, low-head, micro-sprinklers; using telemetric controls to operate the entire district from a centralized computer system and retiring all district debt.