

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Conservation, landowner cooperation help protect critical salmon stream

He's a practical, no-nonsense cattleman who wears a white hat – literally. But professional biologists and conservationists who have worked with Tom Hendrickson during the past few years believe he wears a metaphorical white hat, too.

The reason is simple, says USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service Resource Conservationist, Jim Schroeder. "Tom cares about his land and works hard to conserve it," he says. "Tom is always looking for conservation opportunities and simply doesn't give up when he knows the end results will be good," he says. "Tom and Kim have worked hard to improve this ranch and its environmental footprint."

For Kent Mayer, Mr. Hendrickson is a godsend. "I simply couldn't do my work without Tom's cooperation," he says. Mayer, a fish biologist with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), is conducting steelhead research on what he describes as one of the most robust small stream spawning populations in the Snake River basin. "I thank God that Tom

and Kim give us access to their property. It's ideal for our research."

Mr. Hendrickson and his wife Kim are among several dozen private landowners

who are contributing – both through their cooperation and their hard work – to the health of Asotin Creek in southeast Washington.

The road to conservation

Four years ago the Hendricksons took advantage of an opportunity to conserve their land and to implement some practical improvements for their cattle operation through the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). In the intervening years, the couple has installed four acres of conservation cover; 37 acres of tree and shrub plantings; nearly 100 acres of riparian forest buffer; two livestock crossings; five-plus miles of fencing and nine watering systems.

"As I see it," Mrs. Hendrickson says, "the program is a 'win-win.' The fencing and the buffers protect the creek and at the same time, help us manage our cattle," she says.



With help from the NRCS, the Hendricksons (from left Tom, Katie and Kim) have implemented key conservation practices along Asotin Creek.

Without the program’s financial assistance, she says, they simply couldn’t afford the practices that were required to keep their cattle out of the riparian area along the creek – and keep them watered. “If



WDFW Fisheries Technician, Darin Hathaway, holds a wild, male steelhead measuring 30 inches in length at a trapping site in Asotin Creek. (Photo by Kent Mayer.)

Schroeder says landowners have also worked through the local conservation district and the NRCS to implement tillage management systems that have had a positive impact on water quality in the stream, as well. “There’s been a big emphasis on using direct seeding techniques on cropland in the watershed,” he says, “which has had a huge impact on reducing the sediment loading in the stream.” Reducing the sediment, he says, improves fish habitat and contributes to the overall health of the stream.

If you build it...

Mayer’s research is designed to establish a baseline for the stream’s steelhead population. Still, he’s astounded by the number of steelhead that he and his team have counted. “Asotin Creek is a relatively small tributary, but in a way, it’s an oasis,” he says. “While other streams seem to be going down the tubes, this one is not. Obviously, we’d like to know why.”

Without more data, scientists stop short of directly linking Asotin Creek’s prolific steelhead population with the habitat and riparian work that’s been occurring during the past decade. Nonetheless, Mayer says it’s fair to say that one possible contributor is the stream’s healthy riparian habitat.

“My personal belief, is that ‘if you build it, they will come,’” he says.

And Mayer, who has spent nearly three years trapping, tagging and counting the salmon, says they continue to come – in astonishing numbers. Traveling from the ocean to their spawning beds in Asotin Creek and its tributaries, the steelhead must negotiate 16 dams in their 950 mile round-trip quest to procreate. Still, he says, “the native fish from this stream have a remarkable capacity to thrive, while salmon from other streams continue to struggle.”

Cooperation trumps confrontation

Asotin Creek’s recent history is one that

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**Kent Mayer,
Fish Biologist
Washington Dept. of Fish
and Wildlife**

we’d have to foot the whole bill,” Mrs. Hendrickson says, “it just wouldn’t get done.”

Private landowners – solid solutions

For conservationists, the type of riparian protection the Hendrickson’s and so many other private landowners along Asotin Creek have been involved in is critical to maintaining the health of the stream.

“There’s no doubt that private landowners are a critical link in the health of our streams,” WDFW’s Mayer says. “For example, most of the migration corridors and most of the redds – salmon spawning beds – on Asotin Creek go right through private land,” he says. “Without the stewardship of the private landowners, those beds could be in jeopardy.”

Mr. Mayer says that thanks to years of work with local landowners, almost 100 percent of the stream is now fenced off from cattle. “Excluding the cattle from the stream significantly reduces the chances of disturbing the spawning beds,” he says.

On the upland side of the equation, NRCS’

is highlighted by landowner cooperation. NRCS' Schroeder gives credit to the Asotin County Conservation District for laying the groundwork for that cooperation. "The district has done a



Thanks to the cooperation of the Hendricksons, WDFW Fish Biologist Kent Mayer (above) has been able to conduct critical steelhead research on Asotin Creek.

cattle out of the creek," Mrs. Hendrickson says.

"Besides, it's just easier to work with everyone than to fight them," Mr. Hendrickson says.

WDFW's Mayer endorses that cooperative approach and does everything he can to reciprocate. "My first goal is to take care of Tom and his property. It's only by his good graces that we're there, so I'll do everything I can to foster a good relationship," he says.

Conservation: The next generation

Apparently, that spirit of cooperation is making an impression on the next generation, as well. Twelve year old Katie, the Hendrickson's daughter, volunteered more than 100 hours helping the WDFW collect and record steelhead population data on the creek last year. Even working in the most uncomfortable weather conditions, Katie was a dedicated and enthusiastic volunteer.

"Katie was such a help, and such a dependable worker – that I personally sent a letter of appreciation to her school – so that her efforts would be noted in her records," WDFW's Mayer says. "She's really a remarkable young lady," he says.

"I think her work with the department of fish and wildlife made quite an impression," Mrs. Hendrickson says. "Katie had a wonderful time working with the crew and now says that she wants to be a marine biologist," she says.

And should Katie Hendrickson pursue that career, there may still be plenty of salmon for her to study – thanks in part to the spirit of conservation cooperation that continues to flow throughout Asotin Creek.

*Written by Ron Nichols, NRCS Washington
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Asotin Creek

great job of building relationships with the local landowners," he says. "Those relationships establish the foundation for cooperation and success."

"Sure, we've heard how some landowners are worried about government control, but we haven't found that to be the case," Mrs. Hendrickson says, referring to the often-cited reason some landowners choose not participate in government-sponsored, voluntary conservation programs.

NRCS' Schroeder says he and his agency make it a point to work closely with landowners when developing conservation plans. "Most of the input regarding the implementation of the practices comes directly from the landowners," NRCS' Schroeder says. "It simply doesn't work if the landowners aren't fully vested in the solutions," he says. "It's their conservation plan, not ours – and that's what makes the process successful."

In addition to seeing the immediate benefits of cooperation, the Hendricksons, are also pragmatic in their approach. "We knew that it was just a matter of time before someone would tell us to get our