

Animal feeding operations get help keeping creeks clean

By **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**
For the Capital Press

Assistance programs for farmers and ranchers can help get livestock away from streambanks by developing alternative sources of stock water.

Eileen Rowan, of the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Orofino field office, says one of the most successful efforts has been animal feeding operation projects in a five-county area in Northern Idaho.

These involved cooperation between the five districts, Soil and Water Conservation, Department of Environmental Quality, Natural Resources Conservation Service, landowners and others.

"We started some projects in 2006. The last one was completed in 2014," she said.

These projects were aimed at improving water quality by reducing sediment and bacteria and nitrate contamination. This was done by changing the facilities to keep runoff from feeding areas out of streams, she said.

Winter is usually when cattle are concentrated for feeding, and traditionally feed yards have been near streams so the cattle could drink.

"These projects involved fencing cattle away from the creeks," Rowan said. "Then you have to provide another watering source. This required pipelines, troughs, spring developments, and in some cas-



Courtesy Photo

The area along the creek was fenced to keep cattle away at the Stower ranch near Whitebird, Idaho.

es we had to drill wells."

Final cost-share figures approved by the committee came to slightly more than \$1 million.

Funds were from the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality and the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission. The average cost-share for each of the 60 projects was roughly \$17,604, or about \$122 per animal in designated feeding areas.

The projects helped stockmen comply with water quality requirements for feed yard runoff.

Ray Stower's ranch, 6 miles from Whitebird, Idaho, is an example.

"We live right along the creek, and this was my grandparents' ranch. The old feedlot

is a fenced-off area for winter feeding. The cattle went to the creek for water," Stower said. "When we have 250 weaned calves in there and they are bawling, pacing the fence and all go to the creek, it creates a lot of impact, especially if it rains for several days."

Trails going into the creek carry muddy water, he said.

"I decided to see if there would be any help for correcting this," he said.

The first time he talked to Soil and Water Conservation there wasn't any help available.

"The next year, Eileen called and said there was money available if I still wanted to do it," said Stow-

er. "They created a great plan and gave me a lot of help with it. This project accomplished what they wanted, and was really good for us, too."

It became a win-win situation.

"I hated the idea of having more fence to maintain, and paying taxes on an acre I don't get to use (next to the creek), but the benefits far outweigh any drawbacks," Stower said.

The project included an alternative source of water for cattle.

"Up the draw there is a really good spring; I've never seen it go dry. So we put in a spring box and piped water gravity flow down to our feed yard with a 1.25-inch pipe," he said.

He used a 12-foot diameter rubber tire for a water trough.

It holds about 1,300 gallons and has room around it

for many cattle to drink at once.

"A year ago, when we weaned in the fall and first used the new pen, I was worried that the spring wouldn't keep up with 250 calves," he said. "For about 10 days we opened up the gate to the creek, and fenced off a small water gap so calves could go to the creek if necessary."

It was a spot where the banks were solid.

"This option was created in case I ever needed to have cattle water in the creek," he said. "We put panels across it so they could only access the creek in that one spot."

He is happy with the entire project.

"Eileen was really good to work with, and it turned out well. If anyone wants to look at it, to see what might be possible on their own place, they are welcome," he said.

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