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Boise's innovative plan to build wetlands is being watched across the country

Boise purchases land to use in an effort to reduce pollution in the river

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CANYON COUNTY - Tucked along the Dixie Drain - about four miles from Notus, Wilder and Parma - sits a piece of land that is perfect for so many things.

Dean Goodner bought the 49 acres about 14 years ago for duck hunting. His Texas longhorns cluster around hay bales near a trout pond on one side of the drain, which runs to the Boise River. On the other, a pasture waits for spring.

But the city of Boise now owns the property - purchased for a totally different reason.

Boise, like all cities in the Treasure Valley, must reduce the amount of phosphorus it is discharging into the Boise River in order to meet federal requirements for cleaning up the Snake River.

The city plans to cut its discharges by 95 percent in 10 years, said Public Works Director Neal Oldemeyer. But to do that at the city's wastewater treatment plant could cost up to \$60 million.

The Dixie Drain, though, offers an attractive alternative.

Too much phosphorus in water can lead to increases in algae, which turns lakes and rivers green and can kill aquatic life such as salmon or trout.

Phosphorus, widely used in fertilizers, pesticides, toothpastes and detergents, can be absorbed into wetland plants before it reaches the river. Water moves through wetlands slow enough to let contaminants settle to the bottom where plants hold them in place.

"If we reduce our phosphorus by so much at the plant and then we go down to the Dixie Drain and divert more, we meet our goal," said Paul Woods, Public Works environmental division manager. "This is absolutely the perfect property for us."

Though the city is still working out how much phosphorous could be cut out - and at what cost - at the plant and the wetlands, officials hope Boise could save millions of dollars if the plan goes through, Woods said.

FINDING THE RIGHT SPOT

Three years ago, Goodner was offered \$1.3 million for the property. He turned it down because he wanted to build a house on it.

Then he changed his mind. Last fall as he was getting ready to sell it, he got a call from the city of Boise.

"I gave them my bottom-line price," he said.

At the end of December, the Public Works Department bought Goodner's land for \$440,000.

The site is about 40 river miles downstream from the treatment plant. There already are wetlands in the area, and the drain has high concentrations of phosphorus and sediment.

Right now, the water runs "clear as gin, but once farmers start irrigating, the water turns coffee-colored," Goodner said.

It's not just easier and cheaper to remove phosphorus at the Dixie Drain than at the treatment plant, Oldemeyer said. It's better for the watershed. The wetlands will filter out more phosphorus than the treatment plant could remove, he said.

Boise residents could benefit, too. Sewer users are already paying more for the initial plant upgrades. But if the wetlands are built, rate hikes and additional costs for upgrades at the plant would be minimized, Oldemeyer said.

AN UNUSUAL IDEA

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has to approve Boise's plan before the wetlands can be built.

The agency is moving carefully and slowly, said Bill Stewart, an environmental protection specialist with the EPA in

Boise.

Although many wastewater treatment plants nationwide already discharge to wetlands, federal regulators "from here to Washington, D.C." are looking into Boise's plan, he said.

"What's different about this one is it's way downstream, and the city didn't put the phosphorus there," Stewart said. "When the regulations were written, nobody planned on this. It's very original."

It's possible for the EPA to allow this kind of water quality trading, but the agency wants to make sure no mistakes are made, he said.

If Boise's plan works out, the taxpayers win and the river wins, Stewart said.

"We're going to do everything we can to make this as workable as we can," he said.

Canyon County commissioners think it's a great idea, said Chairman David Ferdinand. All dischargers to the river have to deal with phosphorus reduction, he said.

"We've been talking about this for a long time," Ferdinand said. "Anywhere you've got downstream and upstream water situations, we have to be working together on solutions."

ONE CHALLENGE

What makes this property perfect for duck hunting and wetlands also makes it perfect for mosquitoes.

Boise's wetlands would be located in "West Nile Alley," said Ed Burnett, director of the Canyon County Mosquito Abatement District.

About 30 percent of his taxpayer-funded budget, or \$270,000, has been spent eradicating mosquitoes from that area, he said. The county has reported one of the highest populations of the mosquito that carries the virus, Burnett said.

"I do have concerns about that, sure," he said. "Do I need another headache?"

Still, the abatement efforts appear to be working. Canyon County reported 178 human cases of West Nile virus in 2006, 26 in 2007 and three in 2008, said Southwest District Health information officer Laurie Boston. In 2009, nine of the 37 human cases reported in Idaho were in Canyon County, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

If the proposal is accepted, Boise would use the best available methods to reduce mosquitoes, Oldemeyer said. If the EPA doesn't allow the trade, the city can always sell the property.

In the meantime, Goodner will continue to ranch cattle on it. As part of the purchase agreement, the city is leasing the land back to him for \$10 a year to grow hay and graze longhorns.

And for five years that began on Jan. 1, he will have the exclusive right to hunt waterfowl and fish on the property. After that, either he'll receive a lifetime license for the same uses or the city will buy his rights for \$60,000.

"The land's worth a lot more than the city paid for it," Goodner said.

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