

Henry's Fork Watershed Council
512 Main • Ashton • Idaho • 83402
hffhenryfork.org

News Release

Contact: Dale Swensen, 624-3381; Brandon Hoffner, 652-3567

Annual conference gives look back at Henry's Fork Watershed Council

ASHTON – The Henry's Fork Watershed Council, in the words of one participant in Tuesday's annual State of the River Conference in Ashton, "has come a long way, folks," from its beginnings in the early 1990s.

The years leading up to the Watershed Council formation were a contentious time when water was short and tempers were shorter. Those who were there called it a "blood bath." The upper valley had suffered the Teton Dam disaster, and hydro-electric dams were proposed along the Henry's Fork; it seemed there just wasn't enough water to go around, and farmers felt threatened by environmental issues. The region began to recover only to be hit by the loss of the timber industry, a sediment dump from Island Park Dam into the Henry's Fork, and the Marysville Hydropower Project blowout. Topping it off, the Forest Service was mandated to revise its resource management plan, which is always a contentious issue in the West.

Then, along came the Henry's Fork Foundation and the Fremont-Madison Irrigation District, proposing the formation of a watershed council to act as a go-between for stakeholders deeply involved with water issues impacting the Henry's Fork watershed. It was envisioned as an Idaho Legislature-chartered entity, a non-partisan group that would facilitate "a more collaborative approach to making resource policy," according to a 1993 HFF newsletter. Professional staff assigned to the council by participating groups would assist in research, analysis and public information efforts.

Teton Valley farmer Mark Ricks, speaking at the 20th anniversary watershed conference, said his vision of Foundation Executive Director Jan Brown in those days was that "she had horns. She wasn't my friend." Ricks said he and fellow farmers and ranchers didn't want some outsiders coming in and telling them how to do what they have been doing for generations.

Dissenters abounded back in 1992 and 1993 as the council was organized. Nobody thought it would work, was the sentiment echoed at the conference 20 years later.

Ed Clark of Ashton, who was one of those organizers, admitted he was among those who doubted the concept and the reality. But in the end, "I think it worked." Ricks even admitted that Jan Brown was now considered one of his friends and a respected colleague.

More than 60 people showed up Nov. 19 for the conference, held at the Ashton Community Center, when the group held its first meeting almost exactly 20 years ago. That meeting was also attended by about 60 people.

Jan Brown and Dale Swensen, co-facilitators of the council back then, were present Nov. 19, and Brown and Clark started the day-long event with their personal recollections of the council's beginnings.

Today, the HFWC is used across the country as an example of a watershed council that works. Several speakers at the conference said they used it as a model when they left the upper valley and moved on to jobs elsewhere.

The council implemented a process known as WIRE, Watershed Integrity and Review Evaluation, for determining what projects would be considered for endorsement and/or funding by the council. Over the past 20 years, 59 projects were presented and 53 were endorsed. Many of those also received some funding.

U.S. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, gave the keynote address at the conference, speaking to the group via Skype. He said he remembered those early years, when he was a state representative in the Idaho Legislature. He praised the council for its "collaboration and community-building" approach to problem solving and called it "a model for non-adversarial dispute resolution."

Brown said it became apparent early on that the council had no credibility without the science to back it up.

"We had no business making recommendations without good data," she said.

In June 1993, DEQ invited Swensen and Brown, as observers, to a meeting at Elk Creek Ranch where state and federal agencies with oversight of the dams and the river met to discuss a blow-out at the Marysville Hydro Project.

"That was the first time those people had ever talked to each other," Brown said. They learned who was doing what, and it resulted in better agency coordination. With that in mind, the council worked to coordinate the gathering and sharing of information.

Information is power, and the Watershed Council is “doing a stunning amount of data collection,” said Scott Yates of Trout Unlimited.

The council has promoted research and conservation projects, and partnered with universities, private firms, state and federal agencies and other non-profits to provide the science needed for management of the watershed.

In closed the meeting, Swensen and his co-facilitator, Brandon Hoffner of the Henry’s Fork Foundation, talked about the future of the council, which no longer has the funds to grant to projects. They talked about the council becoming a clearinghouse for projects and as a forum for discussion of controversial topics, such as a proposed national monument covering much of the Island Park caldera.

A number of speakers expressed concerns about the day Dale Swensen retires and “is no longer here.” Swensen himself encouraged the participants to continue the work of the council.

“It has been the most pleasant aspect of my career,” he said.

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