



## A COOPERATIVE CONSERVATION STORY: THE YAINIX RANCH

Becky and Taylor Hyde are long-time ranchers from long-time ranching families in central and southwest Oregon. When they bought the Yainix Ranch in early 2002, it was, according to Becky, mostly dirt with overgrazed thistles. Today, it's supporting cows and a family and showing signs of a rebirth of forbs, grasses, rushes, sedges, willows and hope.

What has happened on the Yainix Ranch between 2002 and today is the story of cooperative conservation writ small on a once flourishing floodplain of the Sycan River, just above its confluence with the Sprague River in Klamath County, Oregon. Why and how Becky and Taylor came to buy and now manage the ranch is a story of conservation conviction and courage, and the cooperation that made it possible.

Both husband and wife come from ranching families long-committed to conservation-minded ranching. Both witnessed and were deeply affected by the conflict that divided their community in 2001 with the closing of the "A" Canal headwaters for the Klamath irrigation project in mid-growing season. In one single event, they saw years of polarization within their community and years of a mounting environmental crisis come to a head.

Becky and Taylor Hyde were determined to change things. They had a notion that there was a better and surer way than face-to-face battles in court and faceless regulations to fix the land and set the Klamath Basin on the path to economic and environmental recovery. Becky came up with a novel idea: she and her husband would put a practical face on a new type of conservation. They would buy the most degraded property in the Sprague River Valley and demonstrate how cooperation could return the ranch to productivity, the Basin to proper ecological function, and the community to economic prosperity. Becky and Taylor took The Nature Conservancy's "Saving the Last Great Places" to heart, but with a twist: they would save the places that once were great. They would start with an 800-acre postage stamp-sized plot of land upriver from the Klamath Irrigation Project.



The Yainix Ranch was the obvious choice. Once a flourishing wet meadow, it was now a desiccated floodplain on the Sycan River with denuded and collapsing banks, made possible by decades of poor land management. It was as bad as land gets in the Basin. It was telling evidence to why the Sycan and Sprague Rivers – once teeming with redband trout, salmon, and the listed shortnose and Lost River suckers – were now contributors of silt, nutrients and warm water into the larger Klamath system. The ranch was, in the eyes of Becky and Taylor, a surrogate for all the reasons why the fish, the greater landscape of the Basin, and their community were imperiled. They felt with passion that if they could fix the ranch, the Klamath Basin itself and all of its residents could benefit from the lesson.

The Yainix Ranch was the Hyde's experiment to test a simple hypothesis: could sustainable cattle ranching and systemic land restoration be combined and successfully pursued in the context of a broadly conceived partnership – and could the lessons learned be used to transform the Klamath Basin? The experiment sparked excitement from the start. Sustainable Northwest (SNW), a regional community-based environmental group, shared Becky's vision (she was a former Board member) and supported the Hydies by helping facilitate the partnership and providing technical and financial resources from the beginning. The USDI Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) joined in early, too, seeing in the Hydies and their ranch a chance to test and develop the tools and economics of small-scale restoration for use across the Basin. Conservation investors were brought in by SNW to help complete the Yainix purchase, but with the clear

understanding that the management of the ranch would remain with Becky and Taylor. Others pitched in as “Yainix Partners”, eager to support an experiment that could change the people, lands, and waters of the Klamath Basin.

The partners that made the experiment work were the Klamath tribes, the collective name for the Klamath, Modoc, and Yahoosken band of the Snake Indians. At one time, all of the Sprague River Valley, including the Yainix parcel, was held by the Klamath tribes. Later, in the 1880s, the tribes ceded most of their territory to the federal government in exchange for a guarantee of fish, wildlife, and perpetual water rights in the Klamath Basin. Today, the united tribes hold senior water rights in the yet-to-be adjudicated Basin, a source itself of division within the Klamath community.

As the former “owners” of much of the Basin, and as current holders of a right to its fish and wildlife, the Klamath tribes had a special concern for the care of the land, one that included their interests in a healthy river flow, a thriving fishery, and stable and well-vegetated uplands. They understood, as Becky and Taylor had come to learn, that the fate of Klamath residents rested in the health of the Basin. They would come to understand as they spoke and worked with Becky and Taylor that unless restoration worked for the landowners of the Basin, it would not work at all. In their eyes, the Hydes were far-sighted people doing what they and others knew was right for the land, waters, and wildlife of the Basin.

It was only natural that the tribes and the Hydes came to a place of mutual trust, common vision, and concerted action. Key to the Yainix Ranch experiment from the beginning was the creation of a perpetual conservation easement to sustain the ranch as a living lesson for restoration. Becky knew instinctively that the best repository for the easement would be with the tribes—the one people with the capacity to manage the easement and the one people with the longest stake in the land. The Klamath tribes knew just as well that the Yainix Ranch was the right starting point for restoring land health and a place where they could help with their arsenal of monitoring skills and tools.

The resulting easement on the Yainix Ranch, financed through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Farm and Ranchland Protection Program and the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, set history in the Basin and in the United States in two ways. First, it established an outcome-based plan for restoration of the Yainix Ranch. Rather than prescribe how the Hydes should manage the ranch, the plan set forth a description of what an array of state, environmental, tribal, and neighboring agricultural partners wanted the ranch to look like in the future. Becky and Taylor would have a free hand in managing the ranch so long as they managed it for the collaboratively set outcome. The National Riparian Service Team (NRST), in turn, helped in the technical design of the plan and the easement, and helped provide the collaborative and scientific framework in which the Hydes and their partners could come together in mutual understanding and purpose.

Second, the easement signaled a significant role reversal: the Klamath tribes would hold in conservation trust the lands of non-native Americans. Two years of talking, confiding in one another, and building trust based on mutual respect and cooperation made the precedent-breaking arrangement possible. Today, the tribes are fulfilling their legal obligation under the easement: they are monitoring in both simple and sophisticated ways the health of the land, waters, and fish and wildlife on and adjacent to the ranch. The Hyde’s experiment is that much stronger, backed up by the tribes’ scientific prowess, and the financial position of the ranching operation is that much more robust, backed up by the infusion of tribal funds.

One year has past since this new face of conservation appeared on the lower reaches of the Sycan River. The Klamath tribes have surveyed and assembled three-dimensional topographic maps of the Yainix Ranch and installed monitoring points for measuring river temperature, river nutrient and sediment loading, wetland and upland plant community recovery, and river bank stabilization. Wayne Elmore, former NRST director and now advisor to the project, reports the first recovery of essential riparian vegetation (willows, grasses, sedges and rushes) along the building banks of the river’s edge. Though it is too early to see measurable changes in nutrient and sediment loading from the ranch, the Klamath tribes’ biologist, Larry Dunsmoor, is confident that the first decisive steps have been taken toward restoring the Sycan River on the Yainix Ranch.

All of the partners understand that the Yainix Ranch is just a postage stamp-sized plot of land within an enormous Basin; it can do little by itself to heal an ailing river system and depleted uplands. Yet it is an encouraging and hopeful start. The faces of the land and the people of Klamath Basin are beginning to

change in ways unpredictable four years earlier. The trust built between the Hydes and the Klamath tribes has resulted in the first full water settlement in the Basin's recent adjudication – one, significantly, achieved outside the court system. At Yamsi ranch on the Williamson River, Taylor's mother, Gerda, and brother John, reached an agreement on water rights with the Klamath tribes that ensures Yamsi perpetual access to water in exchange for their commitment to collaboratively manage and sustain a wetland corridor along the river's headwaters.



Other signs are promising for the Hyde's experiment in cooperative conservation. Neighboring ranchers and landowners are watching and talking about a new way of doing business. Some are asking about the benefits and possibilities of conservation easements, and wondering how they might begin to work with the Klamath Tribes to resolve their water rights once and for all. Sustainable Northwest is taking the Yainix model to faces and places still mired in conflict. The Klamath Basin Ecosystem Foundation, a spin-off from the Hatfield Group, is working with Sustainable Northwest, the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, NRST, and others in a "Working Landscapes Alliance" to inform landowners about basic watershed functions and opportunities for restoration as part of its watershed assessment in the Sprague River Valley. That assessment, the partners hope,

will be a logical next step in sharing and extending the lessons of the Yainix and Yamsi Ranches.

The faces and places of the Yainix Ranch tell only one story among many of citizen-driven conservation efforts. Yet the themes of the Yainix Ranch, and its sister ranch at Yamsi, are universal and common, in part or in whole, to every practice and practitioner of cooperative conservation, from private to public lands, rural to urban settings, plains to the mountains, coastal shores to inland lakes and waterways, and from the endangered shortnose and Lost River suckers to all wildlife, listed as endangered species or not.

Cooperative conservation is common sense conservation of the Nation's lands, waters and wildlife by people from every walk of life. It is rooted in collaborative decision-making, shared governance, and bottom-up action. It is as straightforward as a landowner working with a single partner to restore habitat, and as complex as a community, like Klamath, working with tribes, conservation groups, and government agencies to establish a collaborative framework in order to achieve landscape-scale conservation goals.

No matter how one pigeonholes cases of cooperative conservation, certain features are common to all of them, including the Yainix and Yamsi Ranches. Cooperative conservation rests on collaboration, not regulation—though it does not supplant the current regulatory foundations of modern environmental law. Its practitioners fix environmental problems by working together to find common solutions. Becky and Taylor manage the Yainix Ranch precisely in this manner.

Cooperative conservation is non-partisan; it belongs to every American practicing it in thousands of small and larger acts, all adding up to millions of acres, miles of waterways, and countless species benefited. The 800 acres of the Yainix Ranch isn't much when measured by the yardstick of square miles, but when measured by the mindset of the neighboring ranchers it can affect the entire Klamath Basin.

Cooperative conservation is anchored in a common-sense land ethic: it presumes that strong economies and vibrant communities are part and parcel of healthy landscapes. This conviction is what motivated Becky and Taylor and the Klamath Tribes to take an unprecedented chance with one another – and to succeed.

Cooperative conservation is voluntary in nature, entrepreneurial and innovative in spirit, community-based in perspective, incentive-driven in operation, landscape in coverage and, in practice, an alternative to deadlock, polarization and litigation. These are all descriptors of the Yainix and Yamsi Ranches and the partners who are breaking ground to re-sculpt the face of American conservation in the 21st Century.

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