

Alliance makes splash with fish screen

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The new Farmers Screen, unlike others, uses no electricity, has no moving parts

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CASCADE LOCKS, Ore. -- When the National Marine Fisheries Service rewrote its rules regulating fish screen permits last July, it gave a boost to a unique design developed by an Oregon irrigation district.

The agency designated the Farmers Conservation Alliance's screen as a permitted design. The alliance has already sold and installed 23 screens.

The genesis of the screen, called the Farmers Screen, dates back to 1996, when floods racing off the north slope of Mount Hood gathered silt and debris and destroyed much of the infrastructure of the Farmers Irrigation District, including its fish screens.

The district spent the next decade developing its new screen.

The main differences between the Farmers Screen and others is the screen is horizontal and uses no electricity.

In its simplest form, water drops through the screen as it passes over it. The design requires fast-moving water to keep fish moving over the top of the screen and clear it of debris.

The screen has no moving parts, which eliminates problems with seals wearing out or mechanisms breaking, said Les Perkins, business development director of the alliance.

Vertical screen designs typically include cleaners that move along the screens to prevent debris from building up.

The irrigation district formed the nonprofit Farmers Conservation Alliance to promote and sell the screen to others irrigation districts across the West and educate the public on the need for fish screens.

On its website, the alliance writes: "With over 300,000 un-screened diversions in the western U.S. alone, the Farmers Screen is an exciting opportunity to save the lives of millions of fish while saving farmers millions of dollars in reduced operation and maintenance costs."

Perkins said the alliance met with doubters when it started marketing its screen.

"We encountered a significant amount of skepticism until we proved it can fit in different systems," Perkins said.

The system needs at least a foot of drop from the start to the end of the screen for it to be effective.

But it is also adaptable to a wide range of river systems, Perkins said. The alliance has spent the last six years "getting people comfortable with the idea this technology really can fit different river systems," he said.

"It took a while for people to know we had this option," said Julie O'Shea, executive director of Farmers Conservation Alliance.

The alliance sells the screens throughout the West. Screens are more common in Oregon and Washington, which are home to runs of endangered salmon, O'Shea said.

Also, O'Shea said, grant funds are more available in states with anadromous fish runs.

In some sites, grants have paid for up to 100 percent of the cost of the installation, O'Shea said. Typically, grants require a match from an irrigation district or landowner.

The alliance had hoped to install 56 screens by 2011, according to information on a conservation innovation grant awarded it by the Natural Resources Conservation Service several years back.

Now that the screen is permitted under the agency's rules, the alliance may be able to reel in that goal sooner rather than later.