



# featured

## Working with neighbors streamlines

By Michelle Huntington

“Things can be done better,” thought Tim Schroeder when he, his wife, Jean, and daughters, Emily and Stephanie, moved to a 30-acre parcel off Cold Springs Road five miles southwest of Douglas in 1998.

The property came with water rights and had been flood irrigated with water from the LaPrele Irrigation District system. The Schroeders had previously owned property that used flood irrigation. “Flood irrigation is approximately a 10-percent efficient use of water,” he says. Tim, who is the district conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation District in Converse County, knew there was a better way and developed a system that not only irrigates their field but their neighbors’, too.

Many homesites in Wyoming are desirable because of flood or ditch irrigation. From wooded and meadow bottomlands to the open fields on higher river terraces, irrigation provides the country amenity most often sought,

according to the Wyoming State Board of Control, by landowners – the ability to raise crops and livestock.

To a first-time landowner, the complexities irrigation adds can be an unexpected source of frustration - or an opportunity to cooperate with neighbors.

### **Water Rights Attached To Properties**

Not all property owners have the water right to irrigate, even though an irrigation ditch may run through their places. Such a ditch is likely the property of someone else or a group, and its purpose must be respected.

Water rights in Wyoming are attached to land by legal description (quarter-quarter, section, township and range), and generally predate residential subdivision, which can greatly complicate matters when people today try to sort out who has rights and who does not. Water right records are kept in the State Engineer’s Office (<http://seo.state.wy.us/>) in Cheyenne. The water is owned by the state of Wyoming; hence

the right also belongs to Wyoming.

Irrigation water rights on most subdivided parcels are generally a small part of a larger single water right shared by neighboring parcels. These lots are generally equal in their right of priority and access to irrigation water so no one property has any advantage over another.

Although many buyers of country property do so for the privacy, water, by its transient nature, moves across boundaries. While landowners may wish to be isolated, they usually can’t take that approach to irrigation water use. Landowners who share a ditch or pipeline system with neighboring properties must deal with their co-owners and anyone who takes a contrary position will likely be the cause of unnecessary conflict (excerpt from *Living on a Small Acreage in Wyoming – Irrigation*, State of Wyoming, State Board of Control, March 2000). See [http://seo.state.wy.us/PDF/living\\_small\\_acreage.pdf](http://seo.state.wy.us/PDF/living_small_acreage.pdf)

### **Supply Ditch Caused Erosion**

Tim wanted to use the water administered by the LaPrele Irrigation District, but he had a major problem when the irrigation head gate, about a quarter mile away from his land, was opened. Water flowed to a supply ditch that was not much more than a scar in the ground and had caused severe erosion every time the water flowed.

“A cow could have stood in that ditch and you would not have seen her,” he quips.

The Schroeders used only the basics when they started flood irrigating years ago. “We set the orange nylon dams in ditches,” he says. “We gradually improved. Now, I’m a dedicated user of gated pipe.”

Tim’s first priority was to use pipe to get the water from the head gate to his property. “The main lateral goes through three different landowners before it gets to us,” he says. “It comes through a series of ditches and pipes. I have an attachment on the road culvert and hook directly onto that.”

# landowners

## irrigation water use



*Jean and Tim Schroeder near Douglas use pipe to irrigate rather than ditches.*

### Uses Gated Pipe

Water in the irrigation ditch can start flowing as early as April, but Schroeder won't irrigate his property until after the first cutting of hay. He uses about 600 feet of 8-inch gated pipe for his field, and, once the water is flowing, changes the set twice a day: once in the morning and again in the

evening. "I try to mimic the best use of surge valves," he says. "I surge an area to get it wet, then irrigate another area. Then I water the area that was wetted, which has hardened off, and you can get water farther across it."

His wife and daughters help him move pipe. "I have to move pipe about every

three to four days," he says. "I water one side then, because of the way our field is shaped, I turn it 45 degrees and get the other side. We take about 15 to 16 joints apart and move it. It's not that far."

The improved water conveyance system averts erosion on the property and, at the same time, benefits adjacent neighbors, who wanted to use their water allocations.

Schroeder manages the irrigation on his property and his neighbors'. "I water for them first then move water down the ditches to our place. Right now, the LaPrele system has free-flow water that does not count against our allocation of shares, which is nice. We will use the allocation after the first cutting of hay."

Schroeder usually gets two weeks of watering – an allocation of about half an acre-foot (the amount of water it takes to cover 1 acre of land 6 inches deep).

"Some years our allocations are short," he

notes. "During the years of drought, we sometimes had only 20 percent of our normal allocation."

Based on a handshake agreement, Tim now acts as manager for his neighbor's water allocation ensuring the field is irrigated appropriately and the resulting hay is utilized by the Schroeders for their show animals.

### Increased Forage Put to Use

The irrigation extends the growing and grazing seasons, and the field is also fertilized for maximum production.

The Schroeders have put the harvested hay and increased forage grazing to good use. Both daughters have been very successful in 4-H and FFA competition for many years with various livestock raised on the property. By utilizing the irrigation water, the family has raised quality animals and built friendships that will last a lifetime.

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