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## Clean water progress measured drip by drip

Yakima Herald-Republic

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*The following editorial appears in the May 27, 2009, Yakima Herald-Republic.*

Success sometimes comes a drip at a time.

Years ago, the Yakima River was awash in runoff irrigation water that carried with it vast amounts of sediments along with a toxic brew of chemicals from pesticides and fertilizers.

One of the most troubling of these chemicals was the banned insecticide DDT. The insecticide was used widely in the decades following World War II because of its effectiveness -- it virtually killed every pest that came in contact with it.

However, it also proved to be damaging to the environment, being blamed for the thinning of bird eggshells, especially those of raptors like bald eagles. It also was linked to an increased risk to human

fetuses.

The release of Rachel Carson's best-seller, "Silent Spring," in the early 1960s brought nationwide attention to the widespread use of pesticides. DDT was eventually banned in 1972. Years later, though, the chemical persisted as irrigated water rained down on fertile fields, leaching out DDT into the Yakima River's ecosystem.

Tests showed levels of the chemical at 100 times over federal guidelines. Landowners feared sanctions through the federal Clean Water Act.

That's when the drip took over. Convinced it needed to help curb river pollution, the North Yakima Conservation District started a program in 1994 to entice Moxee farmers to switch from watering their crops through furrows to the highly efficient method of drip irrigation. Landowners contributed \$6.3 million, with the district securing another \$2.5 million in funds.

The results were dramatic. In eight years, sediment in the Moxee drain fell from 43 tons per day to 4 tons a day. That also brought about huge savings through water conservation.

Similar results also took hold for the Sunnyside Valley and Roza irrigation districts after they promoted drip irrigation. Witness what happened in the Granger Drain. There, sediment turbidity diminished by 90 percent.

Though there's still room for improvement, those irrigation districts and landowners who embraced the use of drip irrigation have reason to brag about their success.

Through their efforts, restrictions on eating resident fish in the Yakima River have been lifted. That's because DDT levels have plummeted from a high of 4,500 parts per billion in fish tissues in 1995 to between 100 and 300 parts per billion in 2006.

It underscores how a bountiful agriculture industry and a healthy ecosystem can indeed exist side-by-side. But it takes hard work, adequate funding and a vision for the future.

What's required now is further support -- whether it's from federal stimulus dollars or other cost-sharing measures -- for other irrigators to practice better management of our water resources. The restored health of the Yakima River is proof enough that methods like drip irrigation work for everyone involved.

*\* Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Michael Shepard, Bob Crider, Spencer Hatton and Karen Troianello.*

