



## Benefits of the Owyhee Project

Owyhee Project stores natural flow of the Owyhee River to irrigate the arid desert. It reduces flood damage and provides water for fish and wildlife, recreation opportunities, and to generate electricity.

### What's the Yearly Value?

Irrigated crops: \$135 million  
Livestock industry: \$81 million  
Recreation: 155,000 visits - \$4.2 million  
Flood damage prevented: \$657,000



The mission of the Bureau of Reclamation is to manage, develop, and protect water and related resources in an environmentally and economically sound manner in the interest of the American public.

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# RECLAMATION

*Managing Water in the West*

## The Story of the Owyhee Project

OREGON-IDAHO



U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Reclamation

## Early Settlers

The 1862 discovery of gold brought miners and pioneers to the arid desert lands of southeastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho. Farms developed in nearby river valleys where water was easily obtained. By the early 1900s, private diversions from the Owyhee and Snake Rivers irrigated about 6,000 acres used to produce fruit and alfalfa and raise livestock. As more people came to the region, farmers developed land farther from the rivers.



An early wheat harvest

## Private Irrigation Projects

Private organizations became interested in developing a reservoir to provide late-season irrigation water and to irrigate additional lands at higher elevations. Potential sites were remote and hard to reach. Small, primitive irrigation projects sprang up throughout the area. Success was often marginal. But, private interests were unable to raise enough money to build a dam at one of these remote sites or to develop a large-scale irrigation project.

## An Agency is Born

To assist farmers with irrigation development, Congress passed the Reclamation Act of 1902, establishing what is now the Bureau of

Reclamation. The Act specified that those who receive irrigation water from Reclamation projects would pay part of the costs for constructing, operating, and maintaining those projects. From 1903 to 1905, Reclamation surveyed Owyhee River basin lands that had potential for irrigation.

## Reclamation Helps Farmers

Reclamation investigated various reservoir sites and irrigation plans while local farmers worked toward irrigating their land. Many pumped water directly from the river. The high cost of pumping led water users to enter into repayment contracts with Reclamation for the cost of constructing the Owyhee Project. President Coolidge approved the project in 1926 for the sole purpose of irrigation.



Difficult working conditions

## New Construction Methods

Workers started building the project's only storage dam and the canal system in 1928. Owyhee Dam, standing 417 feet above the riverbed, ranked as the world's highest dam when it was completed in 1932. Engineers used the dam as a proving ground for the design and upcoming construction of the huge Hoover Dam (726 feet high) which, because of its size, would require new construction methods.



Owyhee Dam on the rise

## First Water Delivered!

Project facilities delivered the first irrigation water in 1935. The canal system reached the entire project area by 1939, bringing more lands into production.



Farming – a family affair

## Changing to Meet Needs

As the West grew and changed, so did public interests and the project benefits. While the Owyhee Irrigation District still operates Owyhee Dam specifically for irrigation, the water is also used by fish and wildlife, recreationists, and three private powerplants. Flood protection became another valuable benefit.

## By the Numbers

- Constructed: 1928-1932
- Structural Height: 417 ft.
- Crest Length: 833 ft.
- Water Storage (Lake Owyhee): 1,120,000 acre-ft.
- Crest Elevation: 2675 ft.
- Base Width: 265 ft.
- Crest Width: 30 ft.
- Volume of Concrete: 537,500 cu yd.



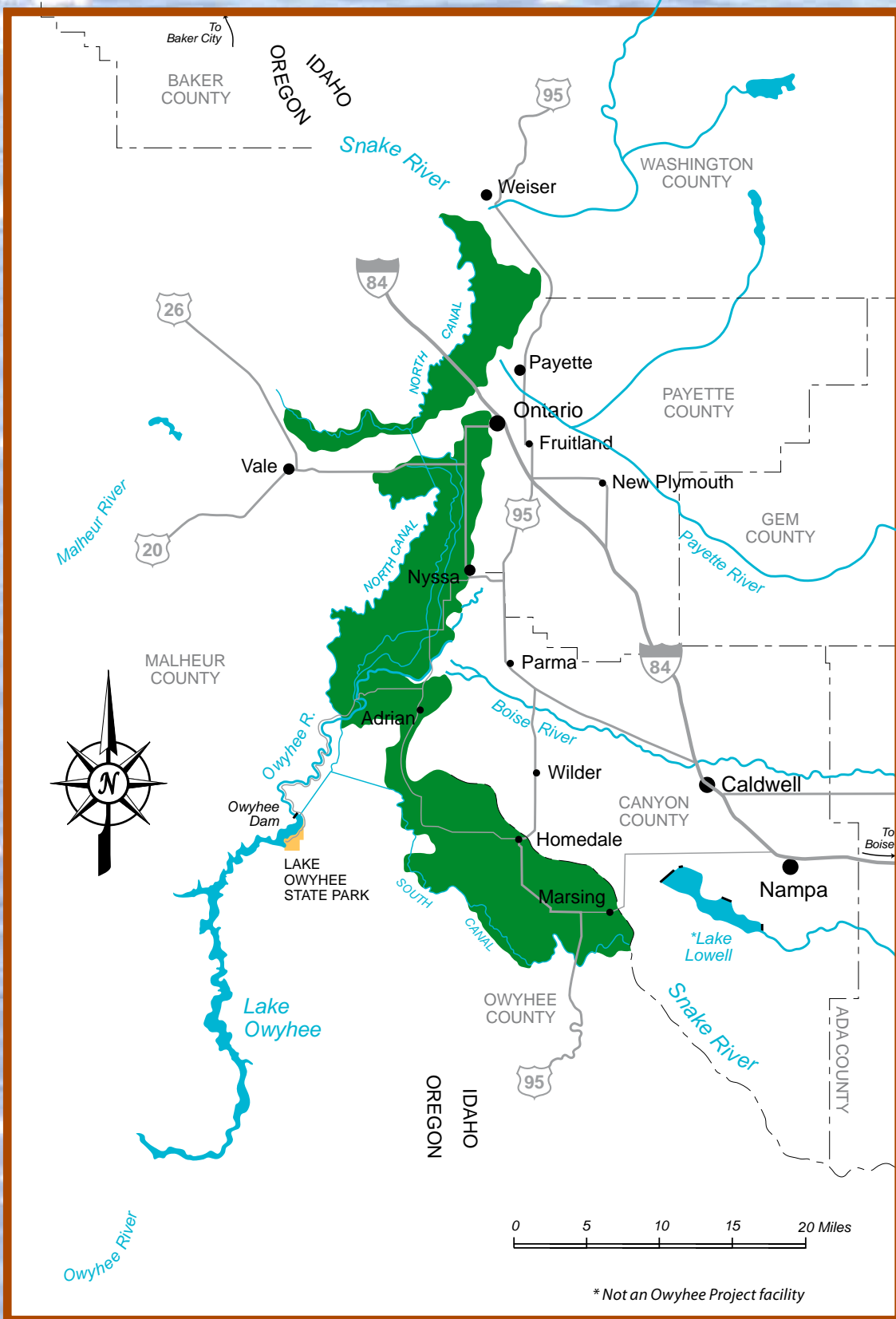
## Owyhee Project Today

The project consists of Owyhee Dam, the 53-mile-long Lake Owyhee, pipelines, tunnels, 9 pumping plants, and more than 900 miles of canals and drains. The Owyhee Irrigation District, in cooperation with the South Board of Control, operates and maintains the project facilities. Reclamation cooperatively works with other agencies to improve streamflow and water quality.



## How Do the Farms Get Water?

Lake Owyhee stores the natural flow of the Owyhee River for later use on project lands. Nearly 8 miles of tunnel divert reservoir water to canals and farmlands. Pumps lift water from the Snake River for delivery to more than 30,000 acres of farmland.



## Irrigation Water = Crops

Fertile lands, a favorable climate, and a good irrigation water supply produce abundant crops on more than 118,000 acres west of the Snake River in Malheur County, Oregon, and Owyhee County, Idaho. Onions, grains and forage, sugar beets, potatoes, beans, and sweet corn and alfalfa seed are all grown on project lands. This crop production is closely tied to agricultural products, processing, marketing, and transport industries around Ontario, Oregon, and Boise, Idaho. Livestock and dairy industries use these crops and contribute millions of dollars to the local economy.



## Reducing Flood Damage

The drainage basin upstream from Owyhee Dam contains more than 11,000 square miles and has an average annual runoff of about 860,000 acre-feet. Up to 100,000 acre-feet of reservoir space in Lake Owyhee is used to reduce downstream flooding along the Owyhee and Snake Rivers.

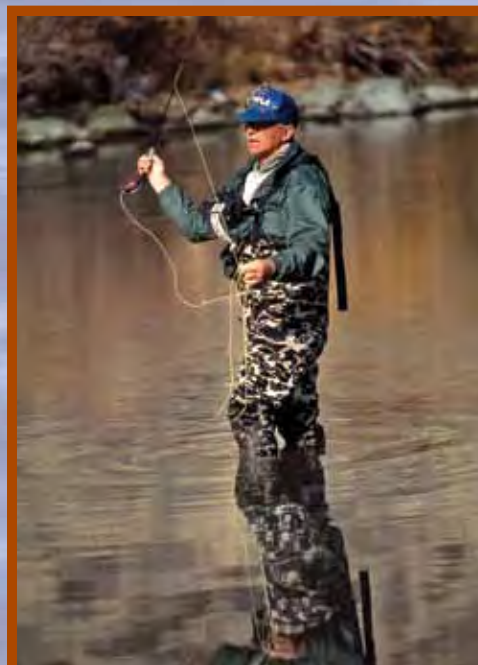
## An Unusual Spillway

The glory hole spillway works like a bathtub drain to lower the reservoir water surface if rain or snowmelt fill the reservoir. Water overflowing the spillway drops more than 300 feet into a tunnel and enters the Owyhee River downstream from the dam.



## A Wild River Ride

The Owyhee River's National Wild and Scenic River corridor passes through southeastern Oregon and enters Lake Owyhee. Recreationists ride rapids in parts of a 120-mile-long corridor through rugged, remote canyon lands. The river offers outstanding scenery, recreation, geology, wildlife, and cultural values.



## Private Powerplants

Owyhee Irrigation District manages three private powerplants built on Owyhee Project facilities between 1985 and 1993. These powerplants generate a combined total of 15,000 kilowatts of electricity used by power customers in Idaho and Oregon.

## Spectacular Beauty

The 1.12 million acre-foot Lake Owyhee offers nearly 13,000 acres of water surface and 150 miles of shoreline in a remote, rugged, and spectacular canyon. Oregon State Parks, Malheur County, and Bureau of Land Management manage boat ramps at Lake Owyhee. Lake Owyhee State Park offers camping at two locations on or near the lake shore. Excellent fishing, boating, waterfowl, and upland game bird hunting attracts many recreationists throughout the year.

Visitors can watch a variety of wildlife such as wild horses, bighorn sheep, golden eagles, pelicans, and cormorants.

