

**TESTIMONY OF STEPHEN K. CHICK
STATE CONSERVATIONIST
USDA - NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
UNITED STATES SENATE AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION AND FORESTRY
COMMITTEE
COLLEGE PARK HORNADY MARSHALL AUDITORIUM
GRAND ISLAND, NEBRASKA
AUGUST 20, 2002**

It is a privilege for me to be requested to provide testimony to this Committee regarding actions taken by the Natural Resources Conservation Service to deal with the drought in Nebraska. My testimony will provide information about three main issues regarding the drought.

- 1. Magnitude and Severity of The Drought Problem in Nebraska -** Nebraska farmers and ranchers are facing a very serious drought this year.

In early July, I traveled to North Central Nebraska near Ord and toured some farming operations. In one case, I saw a dormant pasture, which had just completed a full year of rotational grazing and was about to be returned to usage. One farmer commented, "The cattle will probably beat me back to the gate when I turn them loose in here." I saw a quarter section of irrigated alfalfa, which was supposed to be a cash crop this year, but instead will be used on the farm for winter feed. Farmers in this area of Nebraska have sprayed for grasshoppers three times, but the grasshoppers keep coming in waves wreaking further damage on the already stunted dryland corn crop.

Last week I traveled to Perkins, Chase, Dundy and Hitchcock Counties in Southwestern Nebraska. The trip underscored for me, the difficult conditions in the area. In one instance, an entire 300 acres of dryland corn had wilted to the ground. We were only able to find one six-inch nub of an ear of corn. As we drove south of Stratton we saw field after field experiencing similar troubles.

- 2. The Importance of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program -** Time and time again farmers and ranchers have expressed to me that they are so much better off than some of their neighbors because of the conservation practices applied through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and its predecessor, the Great Plains Conservation Program. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program is the key long-term Federal cost-share program available to farmers and ranchers to help them prepare for and withstand drought conditions. On our state's 26 million acres of grasslands we are using Environmental Quality Incentives Program funds to install cross fencing, water developments and rotational grazing systems. On our 8 million acres of irrigated lands we are utilizing Environmental Quality Incentives Program to install more efficient water conservation practices such as center pivots,

subsurface drip irrigation and surge systems. On our 10 million acres of dryland cropland we are using Environmental Quality Incentives Program to install terraces and grassed waterways and to expand our acreage of conservation tillage to conserve valuable soil moisture.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program is our most valuable conservation cost-share tool for helping our state's farmers and ranchers prepare for drought on working lands. In addition, conservation planning, through ongoing conservation technical assistance has made farming operations more resistant to drought, through sound management planning.

3. What Has NRCS in Nebraska Done To Help with the Current Drought? -

Environmental Quality Incentives Program Deferred Grazing - We are extremely concerned about the potential long-term impacts to our state's grazing lands in our most drought plagued counties. Thanks to the outstanding input of our State Technical Committee Advisory Committee we have made available \$2 million of our FY02 General EQIP funds for an incentive payment for prescribed grazing. This opportunity is being offered in the 16 counties that first received national drought declaration. Landowners in these counties may receive up to \$2 per acre for prescribed grazing for the rest of this grazing season and from May 15 to July 15, 2003. This will hopefully allow these stressed grasslands an opportunity to recover assuming we receive adequate moisture this fall and winter.

Variance to Allow Grazing/Harvesting of Crop Stubble - Landowners who participate in farm programs must meet highly erodible land requirements. Most highly erodible plans rely on crop residues left on the soil surface. Winter feed will be very short this winter, so landowners will need to bale and glean stalks to get by. We have provided guidance to our field offices that they may temporarily issue a variance allowing the use of crop residues on highly erodible lands for this purpose.

Summary: The drought situation in Nebraska is very serious. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program and our Conservation Technical Assistance are very valuable programs that landowners are utilizing to prepare for and withstand droughts. We are using some of our general Environmental Quality Incentives Program to help alleviate what could be long term negative impacts to our state's grazing lands and continuing to provide sound conservation planning. We are also offering a variance that will allow for emergency use of crop residues for feed.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear here today and to comment on the drought situation in Nebraska. I am available to respond to any questions that you might have.