NRCS
Natural Resources
Conservation Service

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West National Technology Support Center

First Quarter Report
FY2008

A Note from the Director

As I look back on our first three years, I am proud of the employees of the West NTSC and the relationships they have built with State staff in the West and across the country. Together we are making great strides in "Helping People Help the Land." We continue to receive new requests for technical assistance, 153 in this quarter alone. And that doesn't include the problem-solving and assistance that takes place through informal telephone calls and emails.

As we begin our fourth year, the FY08 budget is forcing us to be more creative in our work to insure that we are able to continue to provide quality assistance. We ask for your patience as we make adjustments and try new ways of delivering service. We appreciate your support and your suggestions. And we look forward to continuing to provide you with training and technical service.

- Bruce Newton

An Analysis of our Assistance

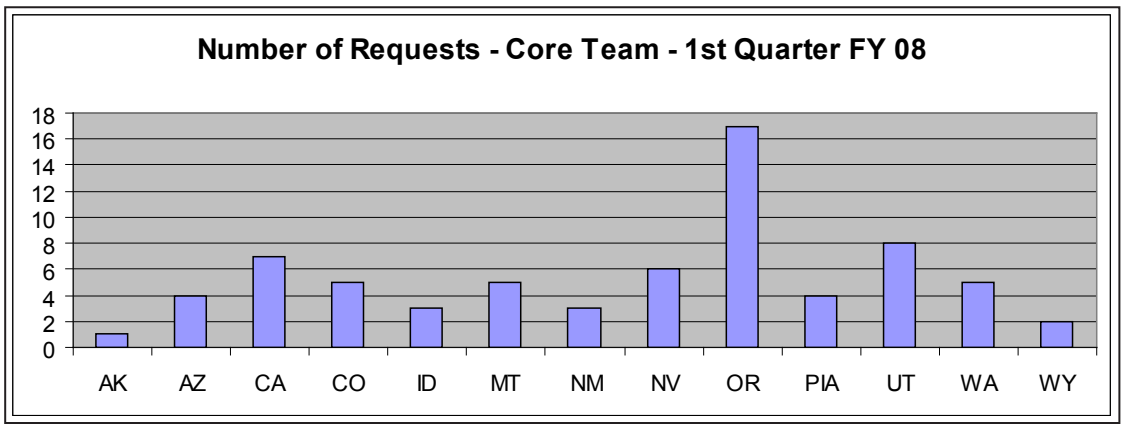
Assistance requests continue to track well. A review of several year's 1st quarters show relatively similar numbers. Staff continues to be able to complete requests.

FY08 1st Qtr All WNTSC Requests

Requested	In Progress	Ongoing	Completed
153	232	47	120

"In progress" numbers have increased, as have "Ongoing." These numbers reflect the increasing workload for National Technology Support Center Staff. For clarification, "In Progress" indicates assistance requests that have not yet been completed. "Ongoing" indicates a task that takes place on a repetitive basis.

We continue to provide training through NEDC as well as through state-requested events. Much of the training includes partners along with State and Field employees. For more information or to track a specific request by number, visit the Assistance Tracker web site at http://ssiapps.sc.egov.usda.gov/RequestTracker/Default.aspx.



Core Team Highlights

Agronomy -- *Tillage Assistance*

WNTSC agronomist, **Tom Gohlke**, provided technical assistance on alternatives for cropping systems and conservation tillage to agronomists and conservationists working with difficult resource issues in the southwest corner of Utah.

Above: ***Marlon Winger**, Area agronomist, **Niels Hansen**, State agronomist, and **Terron Pickett**, soil conservationist, evaluate the effect of contour farming and sediment deposition in the drill furrow. Contouring had no effect and actually contributed to ephemeral gully erosion (foreground in photo).*

San Juan County has an elevation of 6,000-7,000 feet and a short growing season. Many operators are growing certified organic, hard red winter wheat, and safflower. Both organic and conventional systems are tillage-based with low yields, low bio-mass production (residue), and increasing problems with weeds. Water erosion from spring snow melt, late summer thunderstorms, and wind erosion are also significant resource concerns. The primary conservation practice to control soil erosion has been terrace systems.

Depending on the site specific conditions, conservation alternatives for reducing wind and/or water erosion to the soil loss tolerance level (T) are feasible. However, residue produced is so low that even when T is met, the Soil Condition Index (SCI) is negative and does not meet quality criteria for Soil Condition-Organic Matter Depletion. Increased bio-mass and yields are needed to reverse the negative trend in soil quality. Gohlke's assistance included field use of RUSLE 2, alternatives for improved crop rotations for organic and conventional systems, and techniques for improved nutrient management.

Grazing Lands and Biology -- *Sage Grouse Habitat Management Workshop*

Wendell Gilgert, biologist; **Jeff Repp**, grazing lands specialist; **Gene Fults**, grazing lands specialist; **Pat Shaver**, grazing lands specialist; and **Meg Bishop**, ecologist; all members of the West NTSC Core Team, recently assisted with planning and technical support for the National Sage Grouse Habitat Management Workshop. **Bruce Newton**, WNTSC director, represented **Chief Lancaster** and provided opening remarks.

The over 270 attendees included NRCS biologists and representatives from the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish & Wildlife Service, non-government entities, and energy companies, as well as ranchers from several States.

The purpose of the workshop was to bring together habitat managers, planners, and policy makers to promote interdisciplinary approaches to developing ecological site descritions and to improve the quality and ability of our conservation efforts to manage sagebrush ecosystems.

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Jeff Repp and **Gene Fults** have also been involved in the development and testing of the Grazing Lands Spatial Analysis Tool (GSAT), the newest version of which was released in December and is now available on over 12,800 Agency computers. GSAT is a tool for modeling the supply and demand of forage and roughage for grazing animals. Repp and Fults will be providing training to the West States and others in the coming year.

Public Affairs -- *EWP Assistance to Southern California*

Stacy Mitchell, WNTSC Core Team public affairs specialist, spent December working out of the Riverside, CA, Area Office assisting San Diego, Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernadino, and Ventura Counties in their EWP work recovering from the devastating wildfires that scorched the area in October and November of 2007.

Mitchell has been on-site in CA since November 27, 2007, visiting sites and photographing areas of NRCS assistance such as denuded mountain slopes where EWP funding has allowed the installation of "k-rails," sand-bagging, and hydromulching which are reducing the danger to homes and business from mudslides. In avocado groves, CA NRCS designated some funding from the EQIP program to help farmers repair melted irrigation systems and insure water is available for damaged trees and plants.

Mitchell has provided reports to NRCS and to the FEMA office as well as working with the media. After one week back in Portland, Mitchell will return to CA through Feb. 2nd to assist with filming footage for a video news release as well as writing a special wildfire edition of CA Current Developments.

Hydromulching protects soil from washing away and endangering a community of trailers.

Foreign Assignment -- *Ag in Afghanistan*

With an opportunity to help rural residents of Afghanistan establish irrigation for growing food on a larger scale, **Kathleen Dobler**, West NTSC Core Team National Technology Specialist, said "Yes!" and, in September, headed off to Afghanistan for 1 year. She is working on flood control projects, cold storage for produce, and irrigation projects.

Home for Christmas holidays, Dobler stated that the work has been fulfilling but the conditions are far from easy. Going to the field, a typical NRCS experience, requires a caravan of Humvees, 12 armed guards, interpreters, a medic, and air support. On one excursion, her caravan was stopped because an IED was spotted and had to be destroyed.

But she is enjoying it, says Kathleen, and we wish her good luck and a safe journey home.

***Kathleen Dobler** and "support staff" head to the field.*

Retirement

We are sad to announce the retirement of **Ken Pfeiffer**, pest management specialist with the Water Quality and Quantity National Technology Development Team. Ken retired on January 3rd, 2008, with over 35 years of federal service.

We are pleased to announce that Ken signed up as an Earth Team volunteer and has been seen working in the office since his retirement. Now that's commitment to the natural resources! Congratulations, Ken. And our thanks for your continued efforts.

National Technology Development Team Highlights

Energy and AQAC Teams Conduct Pennsylvania Training

The Energy and Air Quality and Atmospheric Change (AQAC) National Technology Development Teams conducted their second cooperative in-state training the first week of December in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The training, for various State and Field NRCS employees in Pennsylvania, closely followed the successful training that the two teams first presented to staff in Colorado last June. Over the three-day training period, students were exposed to basic scientific information about on-farm energy and air quality issues. They also divided up into small teams to investigate energy and air problems and opportunities on two real-life Pennsylvania farms. The small groups analyzed the existing farm situations and presented oral reports to the class on their findings and recommendations.

Both the AQAC and Energy Teams will continue refining this training in the coming months. Presentations are anticipated in other states in FY08—possibly Oregon and/or California. Both Technology Development Teams are also working with the National Employee Development Center (NEDC) and a NEDC contractor to develop several online courses with topics such as "Why Do We Care About Energy," "Why Do We Care About Air Quality," "Greenhouse Gases and Carbon Sequestration," and "Energy and Agriculture."

Water Quality and Quantity Team Works on CSP Tools

The Water Quality and Quantity National Technology Development Team has had several staff members involved in developing tools to determine eligibility and evaluate enhancements for the Conservation Security Program (CSP).

SWET (Soil and Water Evaluation Tool) is a new tool for determining initial eligibility in CSP. The WQQT is currently sharing the Tool with States to obtain their input and fine-tuning it for use in the next CSP sign-up. When the new Farm Bill is completed by Congress, there may be new uses for the SWET tool.

The Team is also developing national enhancements for CSP in the areas of Sediment, Nutrients, and Pesticides. This is the first time these enhancements will be available in CSP consistently across the country. Using the tools and enhancements will highlight water quality in CSP and allow producers to be paid a premium for their conservation efforts. These new tools and technologies also provide insight and guidance for producers preparing for CSP in the future

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The WQQT participated in a multi-agency effort to teach high school students about water quality, conservation and the salmon life cycle. **Shaun McKinney,** WQQT leader, worked with students from several schools talking about how water quality affects salmon, rivers, and watersheds. Students observed spawning salmon returning from the ocean, conducted water quality tests, and learned about soils and riparian ecology.