

“USDA NRCS Technology News” ~ October 2000

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Natural Resources Conservation Service
Science and Technology

“USDA NRCS *Technology News*” is a monthly electronic information piece provided by Science and Technology. It is designed to deliver pertinent information to our customers about new technology, products, and services available from the Soil Survey and Resource Assessment and the Science and Technology deputy areas. “USDA NRCS *Technology News*” is in a format that is available to all NRCS field staff.

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MESSAGE FROM THE DEPUTY CHIEFS

Lawrence E. Clark and Maurice J. Mausbach

Albert Einstein is quoted as having said: "Technological progress is like an axe in the hands of a pathological criminal." Imagine what he would have said about the technologies that have been developed since his death in 1955! Einstein was concerned, as many scientists are today, about the rampant development of new technologies without adequate consideration of their impact on humans, animals, and the environment. Current agricultural technology is certainly not immune from these concerns.

Debate regarding the acceptability of agricultural technology is not a new phenomenon, however. In the late 1890's and early 1900's, for example, the pasteurization of milk was a very controversial topic. Numerous claims and counter-claims delayed action on universal pasteurization of milk in New York City until Nathan Straus, the co-founder of Macy's department store, initiated a campaign to provide pasteurized milk to the poor and to nursing mothers. Eventually legislation and regulations followed, and pasteurization became an accepted technology (TenEyck and Williment, 2000). Today, few would debate the contribution that pasteurization has made to public health.

Recent research and media attention highlight developments in biotechnology and their potential social and environmental impacts. An article in the September 1 issue of the Washington Post cites a study in which scientists predict that "the use of a genetically altered sugar beet in England could lead to a skylark population decline of 90 percent." The research raises concerns that the use of sugar beets resistant to pesticides will allow British farmers to use herbicides that are more powerful to control weeds, thus eliminating the weed seeds that are a major part of the skylark's diet. American researchers, however, have questioned the study's methods and conclusions.

The adoption of these GMO (genetically modified organism) crop varieties has certainly been one of the most spectacular technological changes in agriculture over the last two decades. Adoption rates have been very high relative to other innovations. In 1998, BT corn varieties accounted for approximately 30 percent of U.S. corn acreage, and HT soybeans accounted for 57 percent of U.S. soy acreage (Chen and Buttel, 2000). At the same time, more and more farmers are adopting the concepts and practices of sustainable agriculture. Is it possible that these two approaches to farming can be compatible with each other?

We no longer have Albert Einstein's hyperbole or Nathan Straus' dedication, but modern science provides us the opportunity to evaluate, assess, and make decisions about new

technologies and systems, and the relationship between biotechnology and sustainable agriculture. The debate surrounding the use of biotechnology in sustainable farming systems is so extensive that the National Agricultural Library, with the help of the *Biotechnology Information Center* and the *Alternative Farming Systems Information Center*, has established a "Biotechnology and Sustainable Agriculture Bibliography." According to the Library, "As an increasing number of 'biotec' crops are made available for production and consumption, the dialogue will engage policy makers, researchers, farmers, ethicists and consumers. For meaningful discussions to occur, an appreciation of the many viewpoints held on the impact of biotechnology on the structure of agriculture is essential."

Where this path will lead is still open to debate. The question remains: Will the beloved skylark, famed in song and verse, continue to sing in England?

CONSERVATIONIST'S CORNER

Mike Somerville, State Conservationist, Arizona

The plant communities of Arizona range from deserts where annual rainfall is less than 3 inches to spruce fir forests and tundra where annual rainfall is more than 40 inches. Describing the potentials and limitations of these plant communities, and assessing their current health is an ongoing challenge for NRCS in Arizona. The Grazing Lands Technology Institute (GLTI) and the Soil Quality Institute (SQI) are helping Arizona bring our ecological site descriptions and health assessment methods into the next century.

The Grazing Lands Technology Institute has integrated the ecological site and rangeland health recommendations from the Society for Range Management and the National Research Council into the NRCS National Range and Pasture Handbook. The Soil Quality Institute is helping NRCS in Arizona evaluate new rangeland soil erosion technology from the Agricultural Research Service (ARS). They have begun looking at soil characteristics that may help us explain changes in plant communities. NRCS in Arizona has been working with Federal, state, tribal, district, and other partners to begin trying to put these new concepts on the ground.

Over the last year, we realized that it was critical to bring NRCS staff and our partners up to date with the newest concepts and ideas for describing and assessing forests and rangelands. It was also critical that our partners in Arizona have the opportunity to provide input to state and national leaders. Steve Barker, the NRCS state rangeland management specialist in Arizona, worked with the Arizona Section, Society for Range Management to hold a symposium on ecological sites in August 2000. The symposium provided a unique opportunity for state and national leaders to come together and discuss new concepts. A total of 170 participants included land users, representatives from environmental groups, and agency field specialists from Arizona and other Western States. The response from the participants clearly indicates that ecological sites are important and that NRCS is leading in the right direction.

GLTI staff has been working closely with NRCS, ARS, and others in Arizona to implement these new ideas for ecological site descriptions and rangeland health. The Institute worked with Arizona and other states on pilot projects for assessing rangeland health as part of NRI. We are also using their expertise to look at erosion models, rangeland health research, and planning decision models being developed by ARS. New concepts for determining the soil loss tolerance T factor on rangeland are being discussed with ARS, the Grazing Lands Technology Institute, and the Soil Quality Institute.

GLTI's leadership in moving these new concepts forward with other agencies and universities across the country was instrumental in bringing the national rangeland ecology leaders to the Arizona ecological site symposium. Because of their leadership, the participants were able to discuss the new concepts directly with national rangeland ecologists who have been involved in the changes. Arizona leaders in rangeland ecology from the universities and state and federal agencies provided their knowledge, ideas, and concepts for dividing, describing, and assessing the landscape. They talked about the use of ecological sites as the foundation for land use planning, management, teaching, and research. The Bureau of Land Management, the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the Arizona State Land Department, and the universities talked about the changing uses and needs for ecological site descriptions. This provided the national leaders and institute staffs with invaluable input to make these new ideas work.

Our work has just begun. Moving these ideas and concepts into useable ecological site descriptions will require the dedication of rangeland specialists, soil scientists, wildlife biologists, foresters, hydrologists, riparian specialists, and others. We will rely on many of the Institutes and Centers to accomplish the job. Soils information from the National Soil Survey Center, climate information from the National Water and Climate Center, and plant names and characteristics from the National Plant Data Center will be critical. We will also be looking to the Wildlife Habitat Management Institute and the Wetland Science Institute for help.

NEW PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

Dam Break Video in Development

The NRCS Science and Technology Deputy Area is developing a computer generated video of a flood wave from a breaching dam moving down a valley. An actual NRCS dam near Sallisaw, Oklahoma, was selected for the development and pilot test of the technology. Two and three-dimensional videos were developed to show the movement of the flood wave over time. By using a range of colors, the depth of water can be shown at any time and location along the valley. The videos are based on digital orthophoto quadrangles, digital elevation models, surveyed valley and channel cross sections, and output from the National Weather Service FLDWAV model. The water elevation at each cross section was computed throughout the passage of the flood. NRCS Oklahoma and the National Cartography and Geospatial Center provided the data needed for the project.

The National Water and Climate Center provided the FLDWAV model results. The technology has the potential to show impacts of failure of an aging dam on the downstream valley. Often, downstream valleys have transportation, residential, commercial, and industrial developments. Discussions are underway about applying the technology to selected dams under consideration for rehabilitation. In such cases the site data would be provided to a contractor for video production.

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Five New Forbs Released for the Northern Great Plains

Five new forbs were released in June. Four of the plants were released by the Bismarck Plant Materials Center, serving Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota, in cooperation with Experiment Stations from those states. Those plants are Germplasm purple prairie clover (*Dalea purpurea*), Bismarck Germplasm stiff sunflower (*Helianthus pauciflorus*), Medicine Creek Germplasm Maximilian sunflower (*Helianthus maximiliani*), and Bismarck Germplasm narrow-leaved purple coneflower (*Echinacea angustifolia*). The fifth plant, Antelope Germplasm slender white prairie clover (*Dalea candida*), is a joint release between Bridger Plant Materials Center and Bismarck Plant Materials Center, along with the Experiment Stations of North Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming. Information on these five plants was presented as a poster paper at the 17th North American Prairie Conference, July 16-20 in Mason City, Iowa. A one-page abstract of the paper and a flyer detailing the new forbs are available from the Bismarck PMC.

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National Water Management Center's International Intern Produces Report

The National Water Management Center (NWMC) hosted an international intern student from May to August. The student helped the Lower Mississippi Valley Initiative Group develop plans for addressing agricultural and environmental problems within the basin. David Kunst, an International Masters student in from the Hogeschool IJselland (Deventer, the Netherlands) and the University of Greenwich (London, United Kingdom), has completed his studies through an internship with the NWMC.

Kunst identified (international) environmental policies, approaches, and solutions that could be used in developing a comprehensive action plan for the Lower Mississippi Valley Initiative. The plan's purpose is to minimize nutrient emissions from agriculture to the Mississippi River. The concluding report provides recommendations on how the Lower Mississippi Valley Initiative can address nutrient-related problems occurring in the Lower Mississippi River Valley and in the Gulf of Mexico.

The report mentions that other nations, including western European nations, have already developed policies, tools, and measures to minimize the emissions of nutrients to an aquatic system from which American policy makers can learn.

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Technical Assistance Available for Alternative Enterprises and Agritourism

Increasingly, farmers, ranchers, and rural communities are looking for ways to sustain themselves through alternative enterprise, agritourism, and other income-producing opportunities. In addition, small farmers, limited resource farmers, and minority farmers are searching for profitable alternatives for their small acreage. As a result, requests for information on these topics have increased significantly in recent years. Many Resource Conservation and Development Councils and other groups have provided training workshops to help meet informational needs.

Technical assistance relating to alternative enterprise and agritourism is available to field staff to assist them in providing help to private landowners and rural communities. James A. Maetzold, national alternative enterprise and agritourism leader; Larry D. Butler, director, Grazing Lands Technology Institute; and Boyd Byelick, Wyoming biologist and member of the NRCS Northern Plains Grazing Lands Resource Team, are the team members providing technical assistance. Butler can be reached at (817) 509-3220 and at lbutler@ftw.nrcs.usda.gov. Contact Byelick at (307) 772-2015 x119 or byelich@lamar.colostate.edu.

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Order New Alternative Enterprises Brochure

The Resource Economics and Social Sciences Division and the Resource Conservation and Development Division have developed a brochure titled “Alternative Enterprises: For Higher Profits and Healthier Land.” The publication provides ideas about discovering new income-producing opportunities for diversifying into new enterprises or expanding those that customers already have. These free brochures can be obtained by calling 1-888-LANDCARE or by e-mail from the contact below.

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TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES

Woolypod Vetch Study Underway

Woolypod vetch is a commonly used cover crop in California and Arizona, with ‘Lana’ being the most commonly used cultivar. The Tucson Plant Materials Center is partnering with the Lockeford, California, Plant Materials Center and the University of California at Davis in a woolypod vetch (*Vicia villosa*) trial. The objective of this trial is to develop a selection of woolypod vetch that has superior growth and yield. The trial consists of 15 accessions of vetch with each accession replicated four times. The Tucson ICARDA line, I-2443-98, had a significantly higher yield than the other accessions.

A technical note summarizing the results will be distributed to field offices in the PMC service area and will be posted on the Internet in the future. Depending on interest from field offices, we may pursue additional testing of the ICARDA line and compare its performance as a cover crop against ‘Lana’ woolypod vetch.

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TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

Core-4 Conservation Update

Six pilot states will participate in building a Core-4 conservation alliance or expand an existing alliance to include Core-4 conservation activities. These states include

Colorado, Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota, and Ohio. Five of the six states have already scheduled alliance meetings that were scheduled to be completed in September and October 2000. Core-4 conservation alliances will deliver a consistent message to farmers and ranchers regarding the benefits of conservation tillage, nutrient and pest management, and conservation buffers. One state has added irrigation water management to the Core-4 conservation practices since this practice is an integral part of the systems they apply. These alliances can also assist in developing and implementing field demonstrations, disseminating information, and providing leads for success stories that can be used by the farm media.

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West Region Plant Materials Centers Partner with Native Americans

NRCS Plant Material Centers (PMC) in Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington are partnering with Native American tribes in the Western United States to address resource concerns on tribal lands.

Examples of how the PMCs are assisting Native Americans include:

- Montana PMC reviewed a grant proposal for greenhouse acquisition on three reservations and provided technical write-ups for greenhouse construction.
- Technical assistance and plant materials for native plant restoration efforts on Molokai was provided by the Hawaii PMC.
- Arizona and Oregon PMCs are writing Plant Guides for several culturally significant plants describing the taxonomy, uses, propagation, and/or ecological aspects of a plant species. The Oregon PMC has co-authored seven Plant Guides with the National Plant Data Center for use in PLANTS.
- Training in collecting and processing native wetland plants and seeds to aid in the development of a nursery dedicated to propagation of these species was provided by the Idaho PMC.
- The Oregon PMC is conducting two seeding trials, a seed and bulb production study with camas, and a study on the propagation and establishment of hardstem bulrush or tule (*Scirpus acutus*) with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs (Oregon).
- Technical assistance to the tribal native plant nursery programs of the Colville and Umatilla tribal groups has been provided by the Washington Plant Materials Specialist.

The benefits of these activities include meeting plant technology needs of Native Americans, providing the Plant Materials Program an opportunity to study additional native plant species or communities, learning and appreciating the value of culturally significant plants and techniques, and exchanging technical information. It is an

opportunity to aid in the conservation or restoration efforts of some of America's most pristine and valuable landscapes.

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Native Warm-Season Grasses Promoted in the Southeast

The Plant Materials Center is teaming up with state NRCS specialists, university researchers, and private landowners to promote the uses and benefits of native warm-season grasses in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. Numerous sites have been selected throughout these states to establish demonstration plots. Research is focusing on the use of native grasses for conservation buffers, erosion control on cropland, grazing, use in constructed wetlands, improved wildlife habitat, and for excess nutrient removal. Many of the demonstration sites have been established as outreach efforts on small farms. In addition, the Jimmy Carter Plant Materials Center in Americus, Georgia sponsored a successful warm-season grass field day in June.

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Chinese Plant Scientists Visit Western Plant Materials Centers

Six plant scientists from China recently completed a 2-week tour of Utah, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming to gather comprehensive information on forage seed production technology. The scientists are in the planning stages of developing a certification procedure for forage seed in China. They are also interested in how forage seed is produced in the United States. Their area in China has a similar climate to the Intermountain West and Northern Great Plains regions of the United States.

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WEB BASED TECHNOLOGY

New Natural Resource Benefits Web Site

A web site is now available for those with questions about the benefits of natural resource conservation. The site, Ecosystem Valuation, <http://ecosystemvaluation.org>, introduces the background economics of ecosystem valuation. Visitors can find coverage of valuation methods, discussion of the limitations to dollar-based valuations, and explanations of how ecosystem functions generate the services that people value. In addition, the site suggests paths to follow for developing benefit "indicators" to better understand natural resource values. The web site is a collaborative effort of the Resource Economics and Social Sciences Division, Social Sciences Institute, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the University of Maryland.

For more information contact:

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Plant Materials Publications Added to Web Site

Two new publications have been added to the National Plant Materials web site. They are "Storm Water Plant Materials: A Resource Guide," available at: <http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/BCS/PMC/pubs/idpmcarswpm.pdf> (998KB download) and "Technical Note 24: Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Enhancement Seeding Summary," available at: <http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/BCS/PMC/pubs/kspmstn240300.pdf>

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Plant Materials Web Site Updated

The Plant Materials program recently completed an extensive overhaul of the "Related Web Sites" section of its web site. It now has more than 220 links to other resources. Web sites are sorted by subject areas, such as native plants, invasive plants and weeds, forestry information, and ecological restoration. This information can be accessed on the web at: <http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/BCS/PMC/links.html>. The Plant Materials Program web site is located at <http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>.

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Eastern Native Grass Symposium Proceedings Available on the Web

Proceedings from the 1999 Eastern Native Grass Symposium and information on eastern native grasses can now be downloaded from the web at:

<http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/BCS/PMC/eng/eng.html>.

The Second Eastern Native Grass Symposium, attended by 300 participants, was held in Baltimore, Maryland, in November. The NRCS Plant Materials program, Agricultural Research Service, and the National Association of Conservation Districts hosted the symposium. The symposium was a mix of research and practical information on the use of native grass species in the Eastern United States. During the 2-day event, presentation topics included information on native grass establishment and management, wildlife value, water quality, ecosystem restoration, forage production, biofuels, buffer strips, seed production, and landscape design.

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TRAINING

The Leader in You Fall Series Update

The fall schedule for *The Leader in You* satellite training program includes two broadcasts this month, and one early in November. The first, "Shall We Dance? Creating Alliances and Mergers That Work," is October 5, 2000, 1 to 3 p.m. EST. An overview of this program, presented by Lorraine Segal, was published in the September 2000 issue of *USDA NRCS Technology News*. The two remaining seminars are "Women in Leadership: A Business Imperative in Today's World," October 26, 2000, 1 to 3 p.m. EST, and "The Rookie Manager," November 2, 2000, 1 to 3 p.m. EST.

Rebecca Shambaugh is the presenter of "Women in Leadership and Learning: A Business Imperative in Today's World." Shambaugh will share results of her own research and detail how dynamics in the economy and organizations of the 21st century make it necessary to develop broader and nontraditional leadership capabilities. Participants will

learn about women in leadership, building the competence of women leaders, and focusing on the skills needed to motivate others.

“The Rookie Manager,” produced in cooperation with the American Management Association, will provide real world information for inexperienced managers, making it possible for them to move confidently and comfortably into their new position. This seminar is in panel format and focuses on many management issues. High productivity, effective hiring tactics, and gaining acceptance as a boss are among the topics. Participants will also gain insight into setting goals, orienting and retaining employees, and team building.

Contact your state social science coordinator and/or state training coordinator for information about how to view the seminar in your state or to obtain a video copy of the seminar after it has been held.

For more information, contact:

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“Consultation with American Indian Governments” Training Course Pilot

“*Consultation With American Indian Governments*,” a pilot session of a new training course, was presented by the National Employee Development Center, in conjunction with the Social Sciences Institute, August 22 to 24, 2000. A pilot audience of NRCS managers, tribal liaisons, cultural resource specialists, and others attended the 3-day training session, held at Salish-Kootenai College on the Flathead Indian Reservation. Thedis Crowe, tribal liaison, Montana State Office; Jeff Kenyon, anthropologist/sociologist, Social Sciences Institute; and Michael Johnson, cultural anthropologist, Social Sciences Institute, were course instructors. The plan is to offer four courses in FY-2001 in different locations.

This training course introduces several perspectives that may be used by NRCS employees in establishing consultation with federally recognized tribal nations. The course emphasizes a cross-cultural approach combined with a sound understanding of the legal and historical background of tribal relations with the United States government. The need to establish a government-to-government relationship between the NRCS and tribal nations forms the basis of the course.

Consultation with American Indian Governments was developed in response to an assortment of recent Federal legislation that requires consultation between Federal agencies and tribal nations. In addition, the NRCS, as well as other Federal agencies, has an on going Trust responsibility to tribal nations. This new training course is intended to better equip NRCS employees with the tools necessary to better serve tribal customers.

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MEETINGS/PRESENTATIONS

Agritourism Presentation Made at International Meeting

James Maetzold, national alternative enterprise and agritourism leader, presented a paper September 19 at the international “Trends 2000: Shaping the Future” symposium. Held in Lansing, Michigan, it was the 5th Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Trends Symposium. “Agriculture Alternative Enterprises Opportunities, Benefits, Barriers and Recommendations: Results of an Agritourism and Natural Resources Forum” was the title of the presentation. Copies of the paper are available.

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