

## **EWP Program is Like a Shot in the Arm for Rural County**

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Geneva County, Alabama, is located in southeastern Alabama. It is bordered by Coffee, Covington, Dale, and Houston counties, and the State of Florida. As you approach the town of Geneva, an inscription on the water tower tells you something important about this sleepy little southern town. The tower reads—Welcome to Geneva, Alabama, the city of rivers. The Pea River runs into the Choctawhatchee River on the southern edge of town. In addition, the Double Bridges Creek also flows through the town. The soil of Geneva County is very sandy. Take these ingredients, mix with several inches of rain water and you have a recipe for some major road problems.

On April 5, 2003, Geneva County experienced unusually heavy rains. Some areas of the county received over five inches of rain in a very short period of time, causing moderate to heavy



*County and NRCS representatives take a cautious look at the damage caused by heavy rain along County Road 41.*

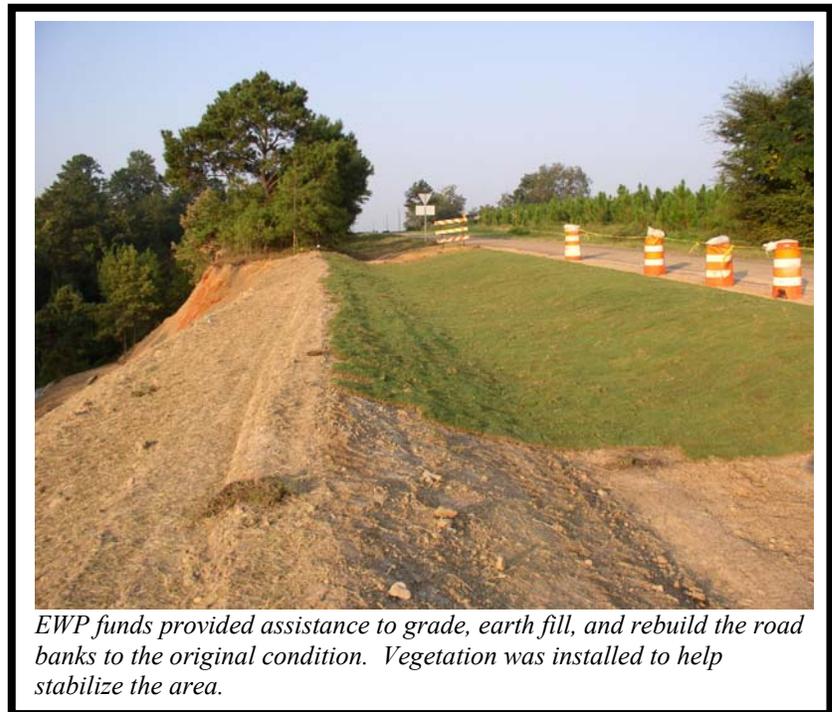
damage to roadside ditches.

Heavy rains continued through the coming week, resulting in additional damages. County Road 41 (referred to as Site #41), north of the Hartford community, received the heaviest damage when a roadside ditch back-slope was overtopped. A nearby gully

then advanced to the edge of the pavement creating a 40-foot drop-off. This damage necessitated closure of the north-bound lane of the road. This was the most heavily damaged site in the

county, but there were numerous others, some 28 additional sites. How can a rural county take care of these kinds of road damage? With their own resources, they cannot. The Emergency Watershed Protection Program is designed to provide assistance with problems caused by natural disasters.

The Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP) was set up by Congress to respond to emergencies created by natural disasters. It is designed to relieve imminent hazards to life and property caused by floods, fires, windstorms, and other natural occurrences. The purpose of EWP is to protect fixed



*EWP funds provided assistance to grade, earth fill, and rebuild the road banks to the original condition. Vegetation was installed to help stabilize the area.*

improvements that are in peril following a natural disaster. All projects undertaken must be sponsored by a political subdivision of the state, such as a city, county, general improvement district, or conservation district. It is generally not an individual assistance program. The program is administered by the US Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to preserve life and property threatened by excessive erosion and flooding. EWP is a cost-shared program whereby the local sponsors contribute 25 percent of the cost in engineering services and contract administration, or cash.

A disaster of any kind usually calls for rapid response to ensure the safety of individuals and to minimize the damage to property. Assistance from EWP requires rapid response. All applications must be submitted within 10 days of the disaster for exigency situations and within 60 days of the disaster for non-exigency situations. In the case of the April 2003 flood damage, the Geneva County NRCS staff and the county engineer worked together to assess the damage and to forward a request for assistance.

An exigency situation exists when the probability of damage to life or property is high enough to demand immediate Federal action. The damage to Site #41 was classified as an exigency site. Roy Powell, Geneva County Engineer, said, “We came real close to having to close it down completely. We did reduce it to just one lane. That gave us about a 10-12 foot margin. The erosion got to within the edge of the pavement. That was by far the most dramatic gully in the county that I have seen.”

When a site is designated as exigency, the law requires that the work be completed within 30 days of receipt of the Letter to Proceed. The work on Site #41 was contracted out. Repairs included earth fill to rebuild the road banks to the original condition. The area was terraced, rock was installed, and vegetation and pine trees were planted to stabilize the area. Powell says, “We appreciate all the projects that NRCS has done for us, but that one was a life-saver.” The road was a major thoroughfare for farm-to-market traffic as well as traffic to homes, churches, and schools.

Powell explained the budget situation in Geneva County. The maintenance of the roads and bridges in Geneva County is funded mainly by state gasoline taxes. In 2004, the county expects to receive some \$1.8 million from gasoline taxes. Other funding sources contribute another \$1 million, for a total road and bridge budget in the \$2.8 million range. No local sales

taxes are levied in the unincorporated areas of the county for road and bridge purposes. Factor in the cost of equipment, and that reduces the figure to about \$2.6 million. These funds represent a cap on the cost of the work that can be done to maintain some 600 miles of dirt roads, 370 miles of paved roads, 173 bridges, and thousands of drainage pipes located throughout Geneva County.

When a disaster hits, the assistance provided by the EWP program is a real asset. Under the EWP program, there are two ways the work can be done—by contract or by force account. Contracted work is bid out to contracting firms. Force account work refers to the work a county or municipality performs using its own employees or equipment for construction, construction-related activities, repairs or improvements to a treatment site or facility. Powell says, “Force account work is a real boost to the county. We have the capability within the county to do the work. Granted, our crews are busy on work throughout the county; but, if we have another

source of funding that we can divert them to, it has the effect of reducing our in-house cost for that crew. Our equipment is being paid for whether we use it or not. If we are able to utilize some of that equipment in doing force account work, it relieves some of the burden on the county, because we are able to generate some of the



*EWP assistance enhanced the county's ability to take care of road conditions that otherwise would have been set aside because of lack of funds.*

funds to off-set that depreciation.”

Probate Judge Harry Adkison says, “Geneva is wrapped up with wonderful springs and water resources. One objective of our county effort is to preserve the integrity of the water resources that are available. Because of the nature of the soil and the water sources, the history of our county is ‘wash-out.’ It’s a way of life. With assistance from the EWP program, that issue is being addressed now in levels that have never been done before. With the force account work, the county has buy-in.” The EWP assistance has enhanced the county’s ability to take care of things that would otherwise have to be set aside because of lack of funds.

#### Landowners in Geneva

County have utilized the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) with great success. EQIP is a program administered by NRCS that provides financial and technical assistance to landowners who want to install conservation practices



*Pine trees and other vegetation are used to stabilize road banks.*

that would enhance and protect the soil, water, air and other natural resources on their land.

According to James Currington, NRCS District Conservationist, “EQIP funding has allowed the county to focus attention on erosion problems. Conservation practices installed on farms have greatly reduced the growth and expansion of eroded road side ditches.”

Geneva County officials would be the first to tell you that because of the nature of the soil, maintaining the county roads is a real challenge. But, it’s home to many folks. One of the

County Commissioner says, “We love it down here; we’re not going to move. We just need help—we need more rock!”

Powell says, “Without the assistance of the EWP funds, it is easy to see, based on county funding levels, that these conditions would only get worse as time goes on. Eliminating these erosion problems is a great benefit to the traveling public by creating a much safer road and eliminating road closures that would occur without intervention to stop this erosion.”

Geneva County is not only a county where two rivers join. It is also a county that has learned the value of joining forces with county, state, and federal assistance to improve the quality of life for its citizens. Powell says, “When you see \$539,000 come into the county to supplement the budget, and we only have \$2.6 million to start with, that’s a big shot in the arm.”

For more information about the Emergency Watershed Protection program or other programs that promote good conservation practices, contact your local USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service office.

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