

Holy Moly! Over \$63 million Invested in Nebraska Landscapes, and Counting!!

- By: Steve Chick, NRCS State Conservationist

New national administration. New Farm Bill. New and Renewed Programs. New and Renewed Opportunities. It was a busy 2009, and it shows in this year-end summary.

NRCS is glad to be a partner with the Natural Resources Districts, State and Federal agencies, private organizations and especially landowners helping protect natural resources.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is really the “umbrella” or main program that provides funding for many other programs and actions. We refer to the “general” EQIP funding as the base soil and water conservation program statewide. There are special initiatives within EQIP like organic farming, NE Legacy, forestry, the NE Department of Environmental Water Quality targeted areas, and others that have separate targeted goals but use EQIP funds. There also are separate major programs like the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative and Agricultural Water Enhancement Program have special goals but are funded with general EQIP dollars.

“General” EQIP

The base program that offers conservation practice cost-share funds statewide. In EQIP, producers can sign 3 to 10 year contracts to install conservation practices.

In FY 2009, NRCS had \$21.9 million available. NRCS received over 5,000 applications totaling \$71 million. In August, NRCS ranked the applications and funded 928 contracts totaling \$21 million on 346,154 acres.

Agricultural Water Enhancement Program

New in FY 2009 was the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP). This new option replaced the former Ground and Surface Water program. AWEP is a component using EQIP funds. The dollars received are separate from “general” EQIP funds.

The two main differences in AWEP from the Ground and Surface Water Program are: 1) it is not a statewide program but supports nationally approved project areas submitted by states; and 2) these project areas are established by local, state, and tribal interest applying for funding to improve water uses. The intent of AWEP is to leverage Federal dollars with local dollars to address local concerns.

In Nebraska, there were 18 applications submitted to the NRCS National office. Five Nebraska projects were approved - most states only had one or two. A brief project summary follows:

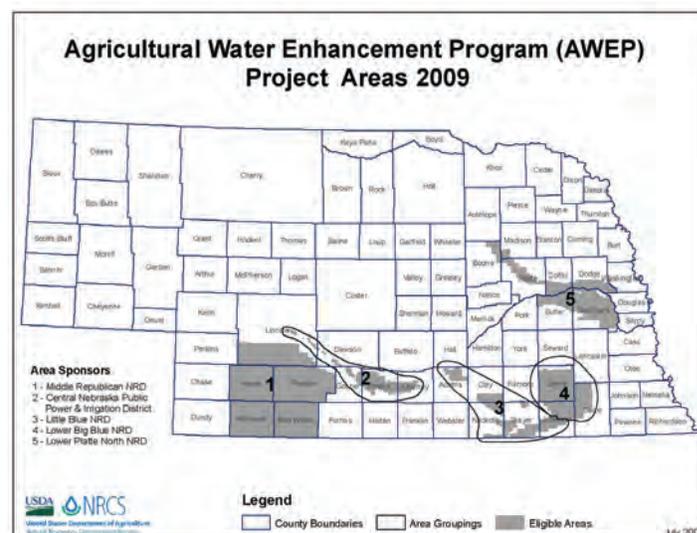
The Middle Republican Natural Resources District, (NRD) has a five year project that will offer temporary and permanent retirement of irrigated land to dry land cropping or other land uses. In addition, funds will be used to increase the irrigation efficiency of present irrigation systems.

The Lower Platte North NRD has a five year project to convert irrigated land to dry land production or further reduce water usage by increased irrigation management or using flow meters or other scheduling equipment. About \$1.8 million Federal funds were requested and will be matched by individuals that apply for project practices.

The Little Blue NRD has a three year project to improve irrigation water use in the Hastings, Neb., wellhead area and between Chester and Fairbury, Neb. Actions will involve converting gravity to sprinkler irrigation, converting some acres from irrigation to dry land, improving efficiency to sprinkler systems and better water management.

The Lower Big Blue NRD has a five year project with two goals: 1) reduce water usage in the Beatrice, Wilber and DeWitt, Neb., well field areas and the NRD’s groundwater management Phase 2 area with improved irrigation management practices; and 2) reduce soil loss in concentrated flow areas with the installation of small dams.

The Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District over five years will work towards to installing 50 new full circle center pivots and 400 acres sub-surface irriga-



tion. Producers agree to farm pivot corners no-till for four years and have some record keeping requirements.

In all five project areas, 699 applications were received. Contracts committing all funds are being signed with the producer. So far, 69 have been written.

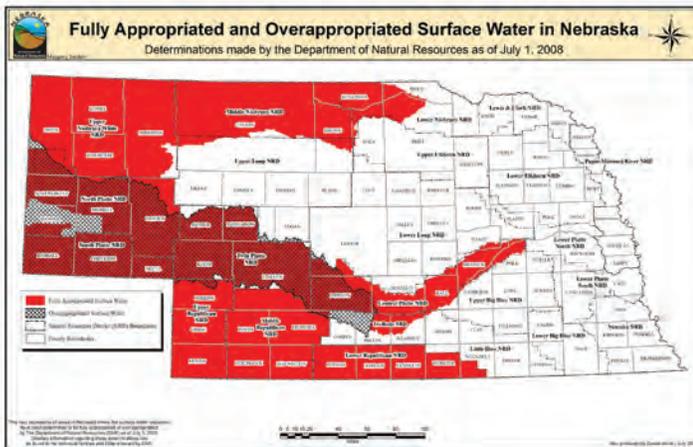
Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative

The Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) is a new program which uses EQIP funds. This initiative allows Federal funds for individual landowners to be leveraged with partner agencies, organizations or Tribes to address natural resource concerns.

“We are partnering with the Nebraska Department of Agriculture and seven weed management areas to enhance weed control actions,” said Steve Chick, NRCS State Conservationist.

There was \$1.5 million for 2009, and similar amounts are projected to be available each of the next four years.

In FY 2009, there were 219 applications and 110 contracts awarded through this program on 16,153 acres.



EQIP Special Incentives

The EQIP “Special Initiatives,” include: Nebraska Forestry Special Initiative, EQIP Organic Initiative, Beginning Farmer/Rancher, Expiring CRP Initiative, Animal Manure Systems, NE Legacy, and NE Dept. of Environmental Quality water projects, and Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative.

The Nebraska Forestry Special Initiative addresses planting and/or managing forest resources in Nebraska. Special emphasis will be placed on practices to improve existing woodlands. \$500,000 was set aside and more than \$367,641 in 48 contracts were awarded.

The EQIP Organic Initiative offers technical and financial support to producers transitioning new acres to organic agriculture. Initially \$1.5 million was set aside but high demand, and dollars from other states, allowed NRCS to add \$1 million to this initiative. There were 72 applications for \$2.5 million.

Beginning Farmer/Rancher Initiative provides a higher cost share rate to producers in their first 10 years of farming or ranching. In FY 2009, \$3.1 million were committed to this effort in 103 contracts.

The Expiring CRP Initiative provides landowners with expiring Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres with an extended deadline to apply for grassland conservation practices.

Animal Manure Systems support was 25% of fund allocation. By the end of the year, \$3 million dollars in 20 contracts were committed.

The NE Natural Legacy initiative is a statewide effort to protect biologically unique landscapes identified through the NE Game and Parks Commission. About \$950,000 are aimed at this effort through 54 contracts.

The NE Department of Environmental Quality water quality project targets six creeks and lakes across the state for water quality actions by landowners. In FY 2009, nearly \$977,000 was targeted to 30 contracts.

Conservation Stewardship Program

The Natural Resources Conservation Service began a continuous sign up statewide for the new Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) August 10, with the sign up period cutoff scheduled for September 30.

The 2008 Farm Bill renamed and revamped the former Conservation Security Program to improve its availability and appeal to agricultural and forestry producers. This program is authorized through 2017 and allows nearly 12.8 million acres per year to be enrolled annually.

CSP is a voluntary program that encourages agricultural and forestry producers to maintain existing conservation practices and adopt new ones in their operations.

Nebraska, like other states, divided the state into four ranking areas so applicants with similar resource concerns to compete with comparable operations.

Over 100 public meeting were held and the sign-up is still going on.

Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program

The Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP) provides matching funds to help purchase development rights to keep productive farm and rangeland in agricultural uses. USDA partners with State, tribal, or local governments and non-governmental organizations to acquire conservation easements or other interests in land from landowners. USDA provides up to 50 percent of the fair market easement value of the conservation easement.

Since the start of the program in 2002, there have been two conservation easements filed on 600 acres in Nebraska. Over \$1.4 million was obligated for this program in FY 2009.

Grassland Reserve Program

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) is a voluntary program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance grasslands on their property. NRCS, Farm Service Agency and Forest Service are coordinating implementation of GRP, which helps landowners restore and protect grassland, rangeland, pastureland, shrub land and certain other lands and provides assistance for rehabilitating grasslands. The program will conserve vulnerable grasslands from conversion to cropland or other uses and help maintain viable ranching operations.

In FY 2009 in Nebraska, there were 120 applications, with \$565,000 in conservation easements awarded on 327 acres. Also, 16 rental contracts on 2,000 acres totalled about \$500,000. NRCS received more than \$8.5 million in application requests.

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced that a Blackwood Creek watershed structure in Hayes County would receive economic stimulus funds to repair a failed dam. USDA is directing technical and financial assistance through this funding along with the Middle Republican NRD. NRCS engineering designs are nearly complete, and construction repair is planned to begin this fall.

Rehabing a Watershed dam, other ARRA Projects

A Washington County flood control structure is scheduled for improvement with funding provided through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

Cost of the Washington County project will be \$1.6 million with \$1.2 million coming from federal stimulus funds to the NRCS. The Papio-Missouri River NRD in Omaha, will contribute \$471,000 to the project costs.

The dam is southwest of Blair, Neb. The construction work will raise the dam height to provide protection to a home, two county roads, and US Highway 30, a major commuter route in the area.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) will also provide funds for technical and financial assistance for projects located in Scotts Bluff and Knox counties. These projects will improve water quality, decrease soil erosion, reduce flood damages, and improve fish and wildlife habitat while creating jobs in rural communities.

Over \$2.2 million will be heading to Scotts Bluff County to complete the Gering Valley Watershed Project. This project will include channel improvements and a diversion to work in conjunction with already installed flood control structures.

This project will protect the city of Gering, Neb., and several area farmsteads from seasonal flood damages. Highly productive irrigated cropland will be protected from erosion and sediment damages due to flooding. An irriga-

tion canal system, vital to crop production in the area, will also be protected.

The Knox County project will receive \$361,260 for a floodplain easement component. NRCS will acquire permanent easements on private land that have been damaged by flooding. NRCS will fund conservation work necessary to restore the land to its natural state on 139 acres along Ponca Creek.

Once the project is completed it will create a corridor of protected habitat. This will provide benefits to area wildlife, including the bald eagle, an at-risk species. The land offered also will reduce flood damage and improve stream water quality.

Resource Conservation and Development

The Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) program accelerates the conservation, development and utilization of natural resources, improves the general level of economic activity, and helps enhance the environment and standard of living in Nebraska.

The 12 Nebraska RC&D's this year completed 148 projects ranging from conservation enhancement to rural economic development. About 70,000 acres were enhanced through conservation measures including range management, conservation tillage and weed management. About 105 businesses were created or retained through projects that provided training, partnering and collaboration among industry producers and retailers.

The RC&D program is successful at leveraging funds. For every federal dollar spent, local, state and other partners supply over 40 dollars toward the same goals. RC&D volunteers contribute on average 45,000 hours each year to better rural Nebraska.

Wetlands Reserve Program

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a voluntary program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property. The NRCS and its partners provide technical and financial support to help landowners with their wetland restoration efforts. This program offers landowners an opportunity to establish long-term conservation and wildlife practices and protection.

The 2008 Farm Bill changed the process for determining the easement value, directing the Secretary of Agriculture to pay the lowest of:

- the fair market value of the land according to the Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal practices or an area-wide market analysis;
- the geographic area rate cap as determined by the Secretary of Agriculture; or the landowner's offer;
- no easement shall be created on land that has changed ownership during the preceding 7 years.



